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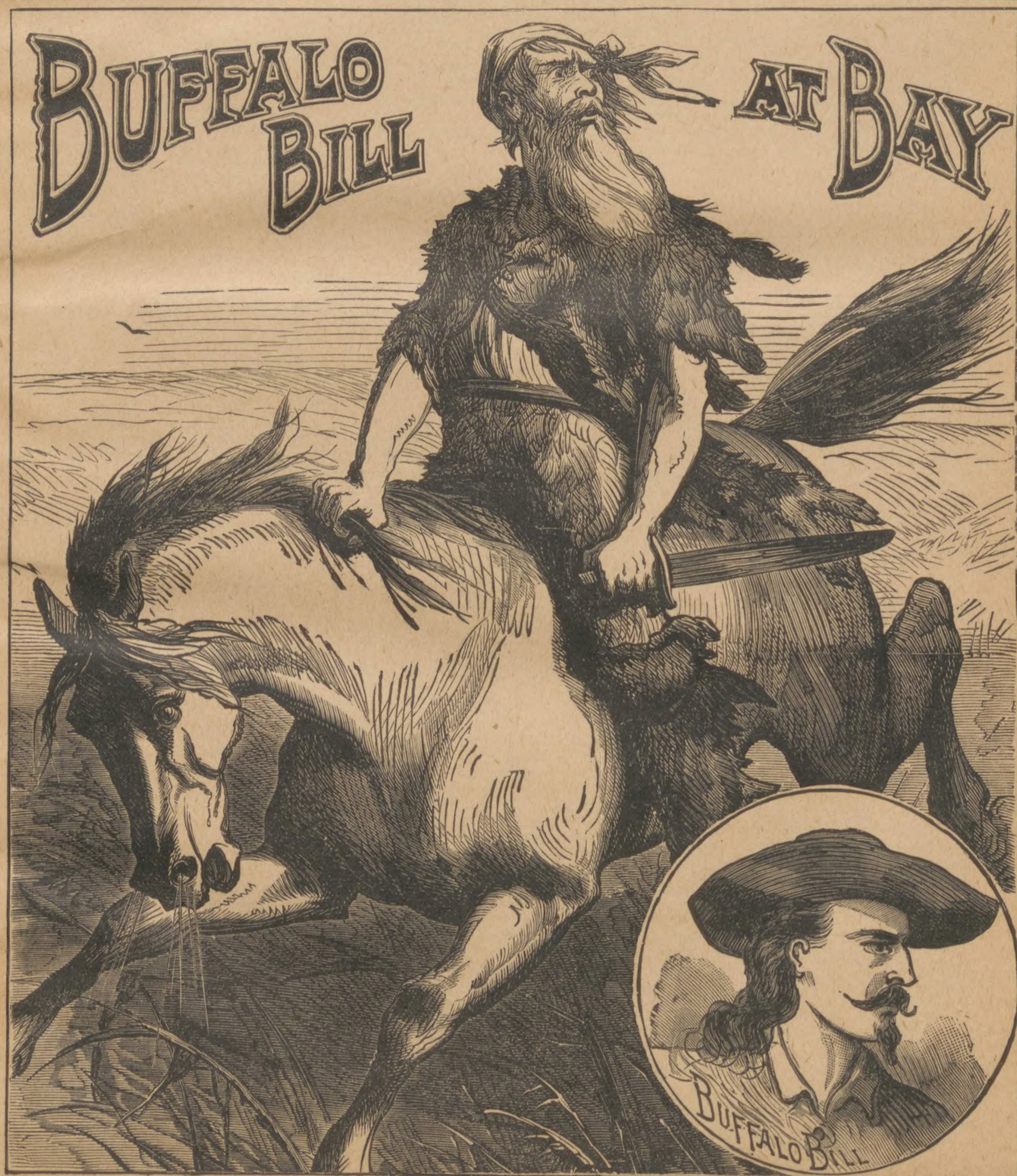
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"A MADMAN, CERTAIN!" CRIED TEXAS JACK.

Buffalo Bill at Bay;

OR,

THE GOLD-SEEKER'S DOOM

A STORY OF THE GREAT SCOUT'S
RED ALLY.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE LOST GUIDE.

"God have mercy! we are lost!"

Like a death-wail the words fell from the lips of a man who stood upon a plain, alone, save for his horse, which, with head hung down, and worn look, was by his side.

"We have fought against the hardest fate, we have conquered every obstacle, have toiled day and night, have suffered untold hardships, and, in the face of all, won fortune, yet now I can do no more as a guide, for I am lost, and those poor fellows coming yonder must die with me here in this wild land.

"My God! the thought is terrible, yet it must be so. It is our fate!"

The speaker was a man of fine appearance, or had been before he had been dragged down by sickness, suffering, starvation, and despair.

His clothes were in tatters, and he stood, haggard-faced and wretched, gazing across a barren plain to where was visible a wagon drawn by four horses, and followed by a dozen horsemen, approaching.

The outfit was as miserable as the men looked, for the horses were in bad condition, the harness patched with deer and buffalo skin strips, and the clothing of the riders was hardly worthy of the name.

But, their weapons were in condition and all were thoroughly armed.

Like the man on ahead, their faces plainly revealed scant food and suffering.

At a slow, painful pace they came along over the plain, heading toward the solitary man a mile ahead awaiting them, and who had ridden back to meet them, coming from a clump of timber which he had entered in the hope of finding both grass and water.

But, neither was there, and the guide and leader of the expedition, for such he was, had turned back to meet his comrades and uttered the pitiful words:

"God have mercy! we are lost!"

Darkness was not a couple of hours off, heavy clouds were sweeping up over the distant mountains to the northward, and the air was growing chill, the night threatening to usher in an icy blizzard.

On came the wagon and its followers, urged to a brisker pace by the hope that their guide had good news for them.

But, as they drew nearer, the look upon his face told the sad story—they had nothing to hope for.

They had missed their bearings, had roamed for days, with provisions growing less, and now were reduced to what game they could kill to subsist upon.

"Well, Captain Scott, what have you to report?" asked one of the men, as they halted where their leader stood.

"Absolutely nothing, my friends. I am completely lost, and do not know what to do to save you."

The silence that followed was impressive, but at last the man who had asked the question said:

"John Scott, do you forget the words you uttered when you brought us with you on this deadly trail?"

"I told you that I knew where we could get gold that would be a fortune for a score of men."

"Yes, you said that."

"And I told you the truth, for the gold is in that wagon."

"True, but you said more—that, if you led us astray, if you deceived or failed us, you would be willing to hang for it."

"Yes, I said that, and I have led you astray, but I have not deceived you."

"Hang him!"

The words burst from the lips of all but one man of that haggard, ragged group; they came with a roar of fury.

John Scott shrank back as from a tornado.

"Hang him!"

The words were repeated fiercer than before.

"You have broken faith, you have lost us, led us here to die, even though you did find the gold you promised, and I, too, say we should make you forfeit your life; we should hang you."

The words were from the man who had assumed the leadership, and were spoken in terrible earnestness.

"Comrades, would you hang me?" demanded the guide, as his eyes wandered over the group before him.

What he read in those faces was merciless resolve, only one appearing to show a sign of pity or sympathy.

The men were half starved, and in their despair, with their gold in hand, they were maddened, crazed, and would wreak vengeance on their guide.

"We will take you at your word, John Scott. We will hang you," was the relentless decision, and the speaker advanced nearer to the guide.

"Remember, I have those who love me, who depend upon me, who trust me, and are awaiting my return," urged the unhappy man. "Will you not spare me, comrades?"

The appeal was useless, for the leader answered:

"You must hang!"

"Who says nay?"

"I do," and the man who had before uttered no word stepped forward.

CHAPTER II.

THE ONE DEFENDER.

The one exception to the wish to hang the guide, John Scott, was a young man of twenty one or two.

He was well built, had a handsome face, in spite of its look of suffering, and there was a fearless expression in his clear eyes.

All eyes turned upon him with surprise, and malignant looks began to creep into the faces of the men whose merciless intention he had dared to oppose.

"What did you say, Percy Willard?" demanded the self-imposed leader, Gordon Gentry.

"You asked who said nay to your inhuman intention to hang Captain Scott, and I answer, No!"

"Thank Heaven that I have one friend," fervently exclaimed the guide.

"It will do you not an atom of good," said Gentry, and he continued, as he faced the young man:

"Do you go against us, Percy Willard, in this matter?"

"Yes, I do, most emphatically!"

"Beware! We all like you immensely, and wish you no harm, but you must not oppose us."

"I do not fear you, and I say that it is an outrage to hang that man, for he has done no wrong."

"He has deceived us."

"He has not. He came here alone into this trackless country, and after a month of hardships and search he found gold."

"Alone he could only carry back a little of the find, which was enough for many. It was another man's, but there before the uncovered pocket and the already gathered nuggets lay the skeleton of that first finder."

"There was no name—nothing to tell who the man was; so it was Scott's by right; so he came back and picked out those whom he wished to have share in his good fortune."

"You, I, and others who are dead, came with him. We found the gold exactly as he had represented, and secured it."

"But we were corralled by redskins, and there the winter had to be passed. Our provisions were nearly gone, and, as we could not leave without this man,

whom you would hang, and myself went on the trail for food, and a long trail it was."

"We returned to find sickness in camp, and, for that reason were detained until the winter was almost upon us."

"But, we then started, and with the whole feature of the country changed by the season, for it does not look the same in the dreary winter that it does in the summer, Captain Scott went wrong, got lost, and here we are, used up, with no food, yet with gold in plenty."

"It is because he has lost his way that you now say hang him, and I say no!"

The young man had related the whole story truthfully and impressively, and all had listened, but with gloomy faces.

When he had finished Gordon Gentry said:

"What you have said, Percy Willard, we know as well as you do; it is nothing new; it does not change our minds; John Scott has got to hang. What say, men?"

"Hang him!"

The shout came from the crowd, eleven in number, without counting the guide and his defender.

They had been reduced by Indians and sickness from a score to a fatal thirteen!

"Men, I have pledged my support to Captain Scott, and I shall stand by him," Percy Willard firmly announced.

"Do you mean that you will resist us?"

"I will stand by Scott."

"Your own death will be the penalty."

"So let it be! It will only anticipate a day or two, for we are all doomed."

"We will easily down you, Willard, so don't be a fool," urged Gentry.

"I shall defend Captain Scott and myself as long as I can, and throw no shot away," was the unflinching assurance, and the young man whipped out his revolver as he spoke.

"No! no! my brave young friend! Do not offer your life as a sacrifice, for these men are blood mad, don't you see?"

"I must be the sacrifice alone."

"Men, I am ready to meet my fate, as soon as I write a line in my diary, and to you, Percy, I entrust it, for I have a belief that you will yet escape."

"Write quick!" ordered Gentry.

With firm hand the doomed guide rested his book upon the wheel of the wagon and wrote two pages in it.

All gazed at him in silence but no pity came to their hard faces.

Then, handing the book to the young man, he said:

"You know to whom to give it. I am ready, men."

"You are armed, Scott, so defend yourself!" cried the young man.

"The man who advances on Guide Scott dies!" and the voice of Percy Willard rang like a trumpet.

CHAPTER III.

THE CURSE.

The guide's defender had sprung for the shelter behind the wagon, his revolvers drawn and leveled.

One of the men who confronted him called out:

"Don't shoot, pards! Let us hang 'em both. We can do it!"

At this the men took shelter behind their horses, every man with revolvers in hand.

John Scott had not moved. He had neither drawn a weapon, nor shown any intention to resist.

"Percy, my boy, you shall not be shot down upon my account. It is madness to resist, and I yield. Here, men, take me, and do not fire on that brave boy!"

The guide held his hands above his head as he spoke.

"I'll take you," shouted one of the men, and he was leveling his revolver when there was a flash and report from near the wagon.

A cry followed, and the intended murderer pitched forward upon his face, a dead man.

"Who fired that shot?" yelled Gentry.

"I did, and have another for you," warned Willard.

John Scott advanced immediately, and called to the men to take him and spare the young man.

Instantly a rope was thrown over his head, and half a dozen men sprung around him, while he called out:

"It is madness, Percy, to resist. Don't—"

But, a second shot cut short the words, and another man went down, while several revolvers cracked that were aimed at the resolute young defender.

The result was that one bullet struck Percy's revolver, and the weapon was knocked from his hand, which, for the moment, was deadened by the shock, though not wounded.

In an instant half a dozen men were upon him, and, borne to the ground, he was quickly secured.

Meanwhile, the guide, offering no resistance, a lariat was put about his neck.

"It was to save you, my boy, that I would not resist, for being shot is better than hanging; but, I do not flinch from whatever doom these mad devils care to inflict," said John Scott.

"I am sorry that my defense was useless."

"And I am sorry for you, my boy."

"Here, men, night and that blizzard rising yonder will catch us, so hurry to yonder timber and string him up," cried Gordon Gentry.

Both prisoners were forced to mount; the two dead bodies were thrown into the wagon, and the tired horses urged to their best pace.

The timber was reached and a halt was made.

"Get out your picks and shovels, men, and dig three graves," cried Gordon Gentry, sharply.

The men went to work, the leader selecting the spot beneath three odd-shaped trees.

The question was asked him:

"Why only three graves, Gentry?"

"One each for our two friends killed, and one in the centre for the gold, for we cannot travel longer with it, if we hope to save our lives."

"It must be buried here, while we hasten on with the empty wagon, for it will give the fact away of the hidden gold if we leave it here."

"But, these two men who are to be hanged?"

"The middle grave is to be the deepest, and the gold is to be put in first. Over it will lie the bodies of John Scott and Percy Willard, and they will thus hide the treasure, below them."

"When we are safe ourselves, we can come in the spring and get the gold."

A shout followed this, for all felt that with the gold they could not push on as they would wish, and could do on horseback, and all knew that death was creeping nearer to them every hour in that wild land.

Quickly they set to work, and, though weakened by hardships, they stuck to their tasks and were not long in digging the three graves, the middle one deeper than the other two.

The gold sacks were taken from the wagon and placed in the bottom of the centre grave, and dirt thrown in and trampled down hard upon it.

Then the two bodies were laid in the other graves, and Gordon Gentry called out:

"Now, John Scott, your time to die has come."

"And my young friend, Willard?"

"We will attend to him later. You hang now."

"I am ready."

"Men, catch hold of this line and draw him up when I tell you, for with his going luck will come to us again," was the next order.

"My curse rest upon you, one and all!" hoarsely said the doomed man, and in spite of their mad frenzy the men shuddered.

"Up with him!" shouted the leader.

CHAPTER IV.

LIKE AN APPARITION.

The rope was drawing taut about the neck of the doomed guide, when once more came the solemnly-spoken words:

"Yes, upon all of you rest my dying curse. May the blackest doom follow you through life—"

"Quick! for do you not know that his curse will hoodoo us?" yelled Gordon Gentry, his face blanching at the guide's terrible anathema.

The end of the lariat had been passed over a stout limb, and half a dozen hands were dragging hard upon it.

Off his feet the guide was swung, and with hands and feet bound he was dragged up into midair.

The frenzied gold-seekers gave a wild yell at his struggles, which were appalling to contemplate, but their glee was checked by the words:

"And I, too heap curses upon you for that black deed! May he haunt you every moment, living and waking!"

"Hang him, too!"

"Silence his foul tongue!"

"Your turn next!"

So, on, went the yells that answered the anathema of Percy Willard.

Bound to a tree, he had to behold his friend's death struggles, and his face was the hue of a corpse, not at his own fate, but in sympathy and rage at the ignominious murder of the noble guide.

Letting the body of the guide fall heavily on the ground when their foul work was done, the maddened brutes rushed toward the young man, whom they also had doomed to death.

"Hold!"

They halted in spite of their fury.

"I have but one request to make of you."

"What is it?" asked Gentry.

"You have never known me to flinch from a duty or a danger."

"That's so," admitted several.

"I do not flinch now, for I do not fear to die; but I wish to say to you that there are men looking with hatred into my face with whom I have shared my last crust—men whose lives I have saved, as all of you know, and if there is one spark of humanity left in your coward hearts, you will grant my request, for it is the request of a man who is looking down into his open grave."

"What is it?" Gentry demanded.

"To you, Gentry, as the leader of these human wolves, I appeal."

"Don't misunderstand me, for I do not appeal for my life—oh, no! I would not accept it at your hands, now; but I do appeal for justice. You have murdered poor John Scott; you have had your revenge upon him, and I believe you will make your escape from here; but that dead man gained riches for you; he shared his find with you, and I appeal to you by all you hold dear on earth, or your hope of hereafter, to take his share to his wife, when you get your own."

"Take it to her, with whatever lie you may concoct between you, as to how he died."

"To my mother I ask you to give my share, and to her also lie about how I died."

"There is in my pocket the diary of John Scott; give that, too, to his wife."

"I have no more to say; so do your worst, and accept my curse upon you, as you will also have to bear that of yonder murdered man."

"I am ready—no, I have one more request."

"Name it," and the men were becoming very nervous, for night was coming on fast, and the wind had begun to howl dismally through the pines; the clouds were getting blacker and blacker with the approach of the blizzard.

"I do not wish to be hanged like a dog. I wish to be shot."

"I will grant your request, Percy Willard, cowards and murderers though you have called us."

"I admit that you have done much for us, been the life of the party, and we all have liked you."

"But that man's own words doomed him to death, and you sided with him and killed two of our comrades, so you are doomed."

"I will do as you say, give what belongs to him to his wife, and your mother shall also have your share, for we are not thieves."

"Now, men, draw your revolvers, stand there in line, and when I give the order you are to fire to kill."

"Come, Percy Willard, I will place you ten steps in front of your executioners, for you force them to be such."

"I am ready."

He walked to the spot indicated, and with his hands bound behind his back fearlessly faced the blood-mad crew.

But, ere the order came from the lips of Gordon Gentry to fire, out from a deep gully not fifty feet away came a horseman like an apparition before the line of executioners, and then the words:

"Hold! I command you!"

CHAPTER V.

THE HORSEMAN'S NAME.

The gulch opened out or ended near the tree upon which John Scott had been hung; and the spot where Gordon Gentry had placed young Willard to be shot was within a few yards of where lay the form of the executed guide.

The young man stood with his back to the body, and also to the gulch, his face white, his lips set, but not a shadow of fear upon his countenance.

His executioners, revolvers in hand, ready to bring up to a level, were ranged in a line.

Gordon Gentry stood on one side.

The peremptory command of the horseman had startled each man of the ten executioners, while Gordon Gentry was fairly dazed.

As for the man so near the threshold of the grave, he quickly turned, and his eyes, with all others, were bent upon the newcomer.

What all beheld was a man splendidly mounted, and seated in the saddle as though molded there.

He was dressed in corduroy pants stuck in the tops of high boots, and a dark woolen shirt beneath a buckskin fringed and beaded jacket, while upon his head was a broad-brimmed sombrero.

He was well equipped. At his saddle horn hung a repeating rifle, and in either hand was a revolver.

His hair was long, and fell below his broad shoulders, while a close, curling moustache and imperial gave him a military appearance.

The gold-finders had not believed there was a white man within a hundred miles of them, and yet this striking-looking individual appeared suddenly before their startled eyes.

But, if Gordon Gentry was amazed, he was not to be baffled. On the instant he resolved to permit no interference with his set purpose.

"Hold on yourself, stranger, until we send this man to his grave, and then we'll hear you," he called out, loudly.

"That man shall not die!" and the commanding figure on the horse half rose in the stirrups, while the revolvers came to a level.

"What have you got to do with it?" from Gentry, insolently.

"Everything! You have killed one man, I see, but shall not commit another murder!"

"Are you saying this to me?" demanded Gentry, now at a white heat of anger.

"Yes, to you and your murderous brigade," and the revolvers moved savagely, fingers on the triggers.

"I did not come in time to save that poor fellow, but I did hear what was said in the last few minutes, and tell you now that no more murder shall be done."

"My dear sir, you will only get yourself into trouble, so do not mind me," now spoke Percy Willard, struck with the noble bearing and intrepidity of the stranger.

"But I do mind you, and warn all these

people that they will rue this day's work!"

"Where is your backing?" asked Gentry, now impressed by the man more than he cared to admit.

"It is here," and his revolvers moved menacingly.

"One man against eleven," sneered Gentry.

"But one, as you see, but behind me is a power you will have to answer to."

"What power?"

"The United States Army!" came the determined response.

The effect was startling. Gentry saw his men grow uneasy.

He himself grew nervous.

"Who are you, anyway, that plays this big bluff?"

"I am known on this frontier as Buffalo Bill."

The response was quietly uttered, but it was a dead centre shot.

The murderers quailed at the mention of the name.

CHAPTER VI.

THE POWER OF A NAME.

"Buffalo Bill!"

Each man echoed the name.

Even Percy Willard repeated it after the others.

All knew the fame of the one who bore it—all had heard of the King of Border-men!

They knew him as one who had won his titles upon many a hard-fought field, many a long trail, in many a desperate encounter.

They knew that he was a man of iron, of nerves of steel and muscles of oak, and whose eye and hand never failed.

They gazed upon him breathlessly.

Did the man fit the name they had heard.

Did he come up to all they had heard of him in appearance?

He most surely did.

The man and his name were united the one to the other.

And his actions showed that there could be no mistake.

He had boldly faced eleven to one, and all of them armed men.

There could be no mistake.

That man was Buffalo Bill.

They knew that he was Chief of Scouts for the army of the frontier.

They knew that he was the idol of that army.

And yet Gordon Gentry dared hesitate still.

He felt that he could without the coming of Buffalo Bill have gotten his comrades out of their despairing condition, led them to some refuge.

With the great scout there, he would be only Gordon Gentry.

Then, too, might he not be called to account for his killing of the guide and intended execution of his defender, Percy Willard?

His comrades were greatly surprised then to hear him suddenly say:

"You say you are Buffalo Bill?"

"So called."

"We do not know that you are."

"You have my word for it."

"You may lie."

"Hands up, quick!"

"Retract that, or you answer!"

One revolver had covered Gordon Gentry in an instant.

The other seemed to be held upon each one of his men.

"Quick, before I count three!"

"One! Two!"

"I didn't say you did lie; I said might, for we don't know you."

"You have to take my word for it."

"Am I to have trouble, for let it come quick, as there is a blizzard rising, and I was going to shelter when I came upon you."

There was something so decidedly indifferent to all danger in his way of speaking that Gordon Gentry was mastered.

He had made a bad break, and he would retreat as best he could.

So he said:

"And we, too, wish to find shelter and food, for our horses and ourselves, for we are starving, and that dead man was guiding us to our doom."

"It is false; he was doing all in his power to save us, for he had gone wrong and bitterly regretted it."

"And for that they hanged him," cried Percy Willard, earnestly.

"And you killed two men in defending him, and die you shall for it," shouted Gentry.

"Dare to harm that young man, and it is the last act of the one who attempts it."

It was Buffalo Bill who said this, and his eyes flashed; his whole manner was like that of an angry tiger about to spring upon a foe.

Again Gentry was cowed, and he said:

"This talk amounts to nothing."

"Our lives are in danger, and if you are Buffalo Bill, the Military Scout, I appeal to you to save us and show your claim to the name of the greatest of guides."

"I can and will save you, but not while you intend harm to that young man."

"He goes free as one of you, or we settle it right here and now, so talk quick, for time presses."

"You have us at your mercy, and our lives depend upon you."

"Let Willard free, men."

The men were scared now at the appearance of the heavens, and they sprung quickly forward to unbind their victim, while Buffalo Bill said:

"I have food in plenty for all, men, and there is grass and water and wood where I take you—ample shelter; but every minute is precious."

"We are ready," shouted Gentry.

"And leave that man who has been your friend and companion unburied, food for coyotes?" said the scout.

"I will bury him, sir, and follow."

"You cannot, let—" but Gordon Gentry and several of the men had already grasped the body, dropped it into the grave, and were throwing dirt in on top of it, while others collected the horses and were mounting in haste.

CHAPTER VII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

Released of his bonds, Percy Willard stepped forward and would have thrown earth on the grave of his friend, but he was rudely pushed back by those at the work, and he turned away to where his own and the guide's horse stood, and mounting his own, led the other, riding up to Buffalo Bill.

The latter was watching the movements of the men like a hawk, and called out:

"Move now, if you would save your lives. Follow me!"

The grave was barely filled, but the men saw that the scout knew the full danger of delay, and at once hurried for their lives.

The other two graves of the men killed by Percy Willard had been filled in before the hanging of the guide, and all knew that in that lone land no one was likely to ever pass there again, so the Gold Hunters had no fear of their treasure being found.

Certainly during the winter there would be no danger of its discovery, and they would return at the earliest moment in the spring.

So one of the party drove the wagon, others led the dead men's horses, and they all followed Buffalo Bill as he rode along the edge of the ravine.

"Come!" he called out, but this was to a pack horse down in the ravine.

The animal had been left there when the scout rode on out of the head of the ravine to so suddenly face the maddened men and their work.

At the command of the scout the horse trotted down the ravine to where the scout led the way across it, and then kept close to the heels of the animal he knew.

The pace set by Buffalo Bill was a good one, and, as the ground was rough, the question was whether the wagon would stand the strain.

But it was forced on, as Gordon Gentry did not wish to leave it anywhere near the graves.

Out of the timber went the scout, and down a narrow, barren valley into a canyon.

This widened out into a heavily timbered basin, watered by springs that formed a considerable stream.

Here, sheltered by surrounding cliffs, was a sheltered spot, and the hungry horses rushed eagerly to feed upon the fine grass found there in large quantities, and quench their thirst in the cool waters.

"Let them free, for they will not stray."

"Get to work with your axes and cut brush for a shelter, as you will need it to-night, and the horses will be safe in these thick cedars and pines."

"Work with a will, men, for night and storm are upon you," cried the scout.

The men did work like beavers, and using the wagon for a brace, they soon had a pile of shelter built right among the pines, two large fires were blazing, the blankets were spread, and Buffalo Bill had taken out of his pack saddle a side of bacon, some dried buffalo meat, a haunch of fresh venison, with coffee and flour to make hot cakes.

The darkness had fallen, and the roar of the coming blizzard could be heard, driving the horses to the shelter of the pines, where they stood huddled together for warmth.

The air grew colder and colder, but the men ate their supper ravenously, and in appeasing their hunger, warmed by the hot coffee and the fire, and with the shelter from the fierce storm, they seemed to have forgotten their late sufferings, and savage hate for their two comrades, one of whom they had left behind in his grave and the other of whom was seated by the side of Buffalo Bill, eating his supper in silence, his thoughts busy with the scenes of the past few hours.

"You saved me, sir, from sudden death, and these men from a lingering one, far more terrible," and the words of the young man caused his comrades to shudder.

He had spoken to Buffalo Bill, who replied:

"I am more than glad to have served you all."

"Yes, you would not have survived this night, men, where you were, for hark, how the blizzard roars, even in this sheltered spot."

The men did hark, and each one realized what they had escaped, and how narrowly.

The wind roared like a fierce battle, and trees snapping off in the cliff tops added to the impression.

Large rocks were hurled down from the heights above, and then came the driving, pelting rain of hail and sleet, driving the men quickly to the shelter they had made, where they were glad to huddle together in their blankets and still shiver to their marrow.

"You share my blankets with me."

"We will be warmer," the scout had said to Percy Willard, and the two in the thick blankets were comfortable and protected and soon went to sleep in spite of the continued fury of the storm.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BLIZZARD.

The Gold Hunters lay huddled together like sheep beneath the shelter the scout had made them build, and with the blankets of their three dead comrades in use with their own.

Well they understood that they owed their lives to Buffalo Bill.

The fires had been so placed and piled with many logs that they blazed brightly, the wind wafting the heat over the shelter and aiding to keep them from freezing.

It was with terror that they heard the howling blizzard, listened to the driving sleet and thought of what would have been their fate but for the scout.

They saw him rise once in the night, wrap his heavy overcoat about him and build up the fires, after which he looked at the horses, crowded together in the dense cedar thicket near by, and where the heat of one of the large fires blew over them, thus tempering the freezing blast.

The return of the scout to his blankets was proof to the men that all went well.

"It is a fearful night," said Percy Willard, when the scout returned.

"Fearful, indeed."

"We are lucky to have reached this place in time to prepare against it, for this wind would have frozen us quickly if exposed."

"We owe much to you, sir,"

"I was fortunate in finding you, but I was looking for this place myself, and which I knew, having camped here a year ago."

"I knew we would have a bad night, yet this is worse than I had expected."

"You are returning Gold Hunters, I suppose, in hard luck?"

Every man was awake, and each ear was turned to catch the reply of Percy Willard.

They had made no mention of the treasure in that grave beneath the body of John Scott.

They did not intend to mention it.

What if the man they had so nearly killed told?

Could they trust the scout?

No, they could and would trust no one, and the moment that the young man told of the buried gold each of his foes vowed silently that it would settle the fate of both the scout and himself.

They should both be slain by treachery.

But the reply of Percy Willard came: He said:

"Yes, we are returned Gold Hunters, after a long stay, and in very hard luck."

The reply was significant, but the scout did not see it in any other light than that they had been unfortunate, had failed to find gold, as many others he knew of had been before them.

The men breathed more freely.

Their much-abused foe had not betrayed them, even to his preserver.

"Well, many come back as you do, but a few are more fortunate."

"Which way are you going?"

"To return home was the intention."

"And your guide got lost?"

"Yes, he got astray unfortunately and so took us out of the way, and, becoming bewildered, he was thoroughly lost, poor fellow."

"It often happens, and guides are not all to blame; but the men, half starved, worn out and desponding, acted from frenzy, and without reason."

The men heard all, and felt that the scout meant to be just.

They listened to hear more, pricked their ears up for a whispered word from Percy Willard that might betray them yet; but none came, and the scout said:

"Well, the storm is getting worse, I believe, so let us sleep it out."

Then no more was heard, and one by one all dropped off to sleep, the very fury of the elements without the shelter making them feel the more comfortable and again and again mentally bless the scout.

The dawn came, but the blizzard still raged, and those who glanced out saw too drear an aspect to leave the warmth of their blankets.

Buffalo Bill, however, sprang up and

again threw wood upon the fires, pitched in the ends of the burned logs, had another look at the horses and returned to the shelter.

The whole earth was a sheet of glass, the wind blew at hurricane speed, to cook would be impossible, and he so informed the men.

Percy Willard would have risen with him to aid him, he said, but the scout recalled his tattered clothing and would not hear to it.

Had the young man done so the Gold Hunters, suspicious of him, fearing he would tell about the gold, would have shown that they were in a humor to trust no man, and shots, treacherously fired, would have ended the career of the man who had saved them and the one he had rescued from their fury.

It was a narrow escape for both, and the kindness of Buffalo Bill in not allowing Percy Willard to face the freezing blasts had saved them both.

Returning to his blankets, even hardened as he was, Buffalo Bill was glad to retreat to their shelter.

Thus the morning passed, when the blizzard had spent its fury, and the scout's experience told him that but one thing would save the lives of the party and that he alone could do.

CHAPTER IX.

MISSING.

What discovery Buffalo Bill had made the Gold Hunters were not left long in doubt of.

A combined breakfast and dinner was eaten, the ice in the stream being broken for water.

"Men, but for this blizzard, I could have guided you on in safety," said the scout, as the party sat shivering around the fires.

All felt that he had some important disclosure to make, and were all attention, Gordon Gentry remarking:

"You have saved us all by bringing us here, sir."

"And myself, for I would have perished away from this good shelter; but let me tell you that I am returning from an extended scout, and, expecting bad weather to set in, I started earlier than was my intention to the fort."

"This fact is the cause of my having a larger supply of provisions than I otherwise would have had; but still what I have is limited and would not last us all ten days."

"It would take you that long almost to reach the fort in the present condition of your horses, and as the country is now, blocked with snow and ice, they could not make it at all, so my only chance to save you is to leave you all my supplies, except what I need for myself, and start to the fort for help."

"My horses can take me there in three or four days, and with good animals I can return for you, within ten days, at least."

"You may get some game to help you out in your provisions, but be sparing, in case I am delayed."

"Now, you know what is before you, and I'll start this afternoon, for delays are dangerous."

The men saw the truth of all that Buffalo Bill had said, and knew that but for aid he would bring them they were doomed. They must depend alone upon him.

Percy Willard heard his words with a sinking heart, for he believed that the men were yet determined that he should die.

He saw that they would not allow him to be alone an instant with the scout, and well he knew what it meant.

It would be one less mouth to feed, and the frenzy of the Gold Hunters had not left them; it only slumbered.

But he decided not to ask to accompany the scout, since that would bring on a scene, and yet he determined not to remain behind to be killed.

Life was very dear to him, and he

would not be sacrificed to the hatred of men now thirsting for his blood, because they had been thwarted in their purpose of slaying him.

Quietly securing some of the provisions left, he planned to slip away on the trail of the scout as soon as darkness came on.

He would trust to his horse to follow on after the scout, and knew that the animal was the strongest and best of the lot.

In vain did he try to get a chance for a word with Buffalo Bill, or to slip a note to him; he was too closely watched.

He did manage to get the guide's blankets with his own, and some matches, and to put these with the provisions he had secured.

In the middle of the afternoon the scout was ready for his start, and to the great joy of the young man he decided not to take his pack horse along.

It was a fine animal, in good condition, and would the more readily follow on after the horse the scout rode.

"Well, pards, good-by, and expect me back soon with help. It is the only chance to save you; but let me say now, that when I return I expect to find my young friend here, safe and well."

"Don't let harm befall him, for if he meets with foul play, I tell you now that every man of this outfit shall rue it, and I am not a man who makes idle threats."

Buffalo Bill looked each man in the eye as he uttered this threat, and their gaze fell beneath his own.

He had read them aright—that harm would have befallen Percy Willard but for this threat.

With a grasp of Percy Willard's hand alone, Buffalo Bill mounted his horse, and, thoroughly protected from the intense cold, rode away.

When he disappeared from sight, Gordon Gentry said:

"That threat saved you, Percy Willard; but, look sharp and do the work of this camp, or you might freeze to death, and we are not responsible for that."

"In other words, you intend to make me your slave."

"Just that; so see to it that the fires are kept up and our meals are ready on time."

Percy made no reply. He prepared the supper, and then said he would bring in wood for the night.

He walked off in the gathering gloom, returned with a heavy log, but, when he was called half an hour later he was gone!

CHAPTER X.

IN A BAD WAY.

The night passed with an uneasy feeling upon the camp of the Gold Hunters. It was bitterly cold and a strong wind yet moaned through the pines, though the storm was over.

The men had all they could do to keep warm, even in their shelter, and yet they rejoiced in the bitter cold, as it was sure to freeze the daring youth who had started upon the trail of Buffalo Bill.

When the morning came there was no abatement of the cold, but they arose, had the fires built up, broke the ice in the stream for water for themselves and the animals that still grouped close together in the cedars and then had breakfast.

This over with they could only crowd about the fire and talk.

Percy Willard had surely gone, and he had taken Buffalo Bill's pack horse to ride.

"He's dead before this," said Gordon Gentry in an exultant way.

"You bet, for he had nothing to keep him from freezing, except his own and John Scott's blankets."

"He had no matches to build a fire with."

"And he started in the dark, so would get lost right off."

So the comments ran until one man

who had been examining into the supplies came up and said:

"Now, I didn't believe Percy Willard was a fool, and he isn't."

"What's up?" quickly asked Gentry.

"Well, he just carried off with him the two saddle blankets belonging to Buffalo Bill's pack horse, and which the scout left, along with his own two, Scott's two and that ain't all."

"What else?"

"He had the saddle blankets of his own and Scott's horse, so he won't freeze for a bed, that's certain."

"He can't build no fire?"

"Now he can."

"Why?"

"He's got a couple of boxes of matches."

"The devil he has."

"And that hain't all."

"What else?"

"Well, I seen ther supplies Buffalo Bill left, and out of ther coffee, flour, potatoes and bacon he just got his share, though I will say he was square enough to take no more."

"He was putting the provisions away, you know, so he just salted his share, and he went off right well fixed, you bet."

This information was a sad blow to the Gold Hunters.

It showed them that Percy Willard knew that he dared not trust them with his life, after the departure of the scout, so had taken the chances of following his defender.

If he overtook him he was all right.

But if not, the chances were largely against his ever reaching any settlement or fort.

Buffalo Bill had had four hours' start and that meant a great deal.

Then, too, the young man had started at night, and could see no trail, even if the frozen ground would show one by day.

The odds were certainly greatly against success.

But he had taken all chances.

When a talk had been had over the going of their victim, it was decided that three men should start out on foot and see if they could pick up the two trails.

By this they might discover if the youth was really on the track of Buffalo Bill.

Three of the best trailers were selected for the work, and they started.

It was hours before they came back, and they were used up with cold and hunger.

Their report was soon made, and it left a most uncomfortable feeling upon all.

They had followed both trails, for the one of the young Gold Hunter was going just as the scout's led, in spite of the fact that it was night.

They had gone as far as they dared, and to where they hoped they would find if Willard had reached Buffalo Bill's camp.

But they had come upon no camping place, only where Buffalo Bill had shot a deer, and hungry coyotes were snarling over the carcass he had left behind.

"It is just this, pards," said Gentry.

All were at once most attentive.

"If he got up with Buffalo Bill, and chances are he did, why we are dished."

"The story he tells Buffalo Bill will cause us to be arrested and taken to the fort, and that means trial for hanging John Scott."

"Sure."

"And military trials are quick and sure."

"Yes."

"We also will be tried for intention to kill Willard, and, in fact, he may bring any charges against us he pleases."

"Then, too, our gold secret will be out, and when we come after it in the spring, if we get off from being punished, why it won't be there."

"Sure."

"And that isn't all."

"What more, for the Lord's sake, Gentry?" asked a voice impatiently.

"Having hanged Scott and tried to kill Willard, there is not a man of us dare go back to our homes to live, whether we go rich or poor."

A groan was the answer to this last assertion, and every man looked aghast, as its truth flashed fully upon him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PLOT OF THE GOLD HUNTERS.

The sun was shining brightly, the wind no longer howled through the pines and the cold was growing less and less bitter.

But these cheering signs the Gold Hunters did not notice.

They were away down in the dumps with the words of Gentry that they dared not return to their homes after taking the life of John Scott and trying to kill young Willard.

They all had come from the same neighborhood and been most friendly with John Scott.

He had been a man of means, but had been ruined in his generosity in endorsing for others.

Then he had gone off to the mines to seek his fortune.

The result has been told, and the very men he had taken along to share his good fortune had turned against him in the end.

And Percy Willard knew the real reason, from having overheard a plot.

It was for Gentry to lead, denounce John Scott, and those who proved his friends were to share the fate he did, and then the number would be cut down that was to share the gold, and returning home, the survivors were to tell how their comrades were killed by Indians, and the amount of treasure found was to be put at one-fourth what it really was.

The arrival of Buffalo Bill had thwarted the plot, though he had saved the lives of the party, beyond a doubt.

Percy Willard's father had been a judge in the community where he lived, and stood well with all, while the son had friends untold.

His word would be believed, and so it was that Gordon Gentry's plot had been foiled by the rescue of the youth by Buffalo Bill.

The men all saw the position they were in if Percy Willard had overtaken Buffalo Bill.

If he had not, but had perished in the snow, then they recalled the threat of Buffalo Bill.

Remembering this, they knew how utterly useless it would be for them to tell the scout the youth had followed on after him.

He would not believe it, and they would be tried for his death, as well as that of John Scott.

The men sat about the fire gazing dismally at each other.

They had been honest men up to the time their temptation to gain more gold than was justly their share had made them turn against their leader, hang him, and seek Percy Willard's death for befriending him.

The death of the two men, slain by the young man, they did not regret, for that took two more out of the number to divide the gold with.

If Gentry had his way, he was determined that there should be still other deaths, from one cause or another, before they reached a settlement.

But Buffalo Bill's coming had brought life to them, yet a bitter blow with it.

They were in a complete quandary as to what to do, and once more despair was upon them.

But Gordon Gentry was a bold man, and one of resources.

He had a will of iron and remarkable powers of endurance, and he saw that all looked to him then.

So he said:

"Well, pards, we are eleven now, and I know each one is to be depended upon."

"We did not anticipate this fearful blizzard, so we do owe our lives to that scout."

"But, where we were living on one-fifth rations, and poor ones at that, a day when the trouble came, we have had good rest and food now, and we all feel the better for it."

"There is little of our rations left, but of the scout's supply we could make it last us, pinched, for weeks."

"If we stay here he will return for us, and that means a trial, and perhaps every one of us may be hanged, for life is cheap out here."

"If Willard is dead, we are not in a bad way; but if he got to the fort, then we are."

"We dare not go home, and we have got to hunt other lands."

"Now, my plan is to get out of this at once, while we have good weather, go on the back trail, leaving our wagon, and get our gold."

"We have extra horses for our gold, and we can make our way back the way we came, to the old deserted mining camp you remember that we passed three days before we hanged John Scott."

"The cabins are good there, game was plenty, with water, wood, and grass in abundance, and that was nearly the last place where our horses had a square feed."

"The old mines are played out, but we can work them over during the winter and get interest on our idle gold at least."

"When spring comes we can light out, and one of us can go to the fort to see what tale Buffalo Bill has told, and another can return home secretly to see if Willard has ruined us there."

"If he has not, home we go; but if he has, why there are other lands and other people."

"What do you say, pards?"

A yell of enthusiastic approval was the answer.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE BACK TRAIL.

Upon maturer deliberation it was decided by the Gold Hunters not to act too hastily, but to stay where they were until the following morning.

The horses had gotten fairly good picking in the cedars, but now that the warmth had melted the ice, the grass was good in the basin, and they were having a feast.

As it was a desert land, almost, through which two days of their back trail would take them, they decided to all set to work getting grass and packing it to carry along for the horses.

Each man worked with a will, and the men went to their blankets that night in much better spirits than they had the two former ones.

They had a definite motive in view now, and all realized the full force of their unfortunate position, should Buffalo Bill return with power to arrest them for murder.

Had Percy Willard overtaken the scout, and have his charges put down against them, it was an assured fact in their minds that they would have a close call for the gallows, and certainly not escape the penitentiary.

The back trail was, therefore, their only salvation, and the deserted mining camp their only hope.

What if they did have to live only on the game they killed during the long, cold winter months, they would save their lives and their gold, though they suffered.

There were deer in plenty, fish were in the streams, and they certainly would not starve, and when they did get out of the mountains they had gold to buy luxuries and the past, with its misery, and grim phantoms would be forgotten.

So they argued to themselves, and talked long into the night.

They were up bright and early the next morning, and a most substantial breakfast was prepared in honor of their going.

Then the horses selected for the bundles of newly cut grass were led up, and had their loads strapped on, and once more the Gold Hunters were ready for the march.

But something had been left undone, Gordon Gentry said.

All watched him as he took from his saddle bags pen, ink and paper and began to write.

What he wrote was as follows:

"To William F. Cody,

"Buffalo Bill.

"Sir:

"We were so fortunate as to have a party of miners pass through this canyon on their way to the settlement to the south of here, and, as they were well supplied with provisions and all else we so sadly needed, we decided to go with them.

"The chances of your return were slight in the minds of all, as we could not expect you back in the face of the winter, which has set in so early and with such severity.

"We owe our lives to you, sir, and appreciate the fact, and, should you return and your eyes read this, let me say that we deeply regret that your journey here was useless; but self-preservation is the first law of Nature, you know.

"The young gentleman in whom you took such an interest, declined to remain with us after your departure, so followed you, as of course you know, for he could readily overtake you.

"Again, thanking you, sir,

"We remain,

"Your attached friends,

"THE GOLD HUNTERS."

This letter was greeted with cheers as a masterpiece, and a receptacle of rocks was built in the centre of the camp and it was placed where it would be dry and safe.

This duty attended to with laughter at the scout's expense at their giving him the slip so cleverly, the Gold Hunters pulled out of the camp upon their back trail.

After a slow ride of several hours they came in sight of the timber where had occurred the fatal feud, and poor John Scott had been hanged.

Their faces grew gloomy as they approached the scene, for they were not yet so sure of escaping the winter with their lives as to cause them to be in a happy mood, and several shuddered as they rode up and beheld the grave of their once beloved leader and guide.

"I don't like this turning back.

"It's bad luck," said one, and there were others who felt as he did.

It was seen that the storm had blown a large pine down, right on the grave.

It had fallen lengthwise of the grave, so completely covered it, and had to be cut in two places to remove it.

This was no easy task, and the axemen went to work in sullen silence at their task, for it was hard work and the delay would keep them there until night, and that meant a camp without water for their horses.

But the sound of the axe-men was soon echoing in the timber, and, as stay there they must, a shelter was made for the night, and the men resigned themselves sullenly to their delay.

Late in the afternoon the large pine was cut in twain and rolled away, and the picks and shovels were called for to dig into the grave and get the gold that lay beneath the dead form of the man they had hanged.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS INDIAN.

When John Scott, the guide and leader of the Gold Hunters, had turned back from the timber where he had found neither water nor grass and started to go and meet his half-starved comrades on the trail and make known to them his

ill fortune, with theirs, he little dreamed that human eyes were upon him, that he had been under the cover of a rifle.

But, so it was, for there had been one there ahead of him, and who had seen his coming.

The numerous ravines in the timber have been spoken of, and up one of these, running parallel with the one Buffalo Bill had approached by, had the one who had detected the approach of the guide made his way.

The man was tall, slender, and in the full glory of war paint, while he wore the bonnet of a chief of high rank.

He was not mounted, however, yet might have a pony near.

Seeing the approach of the guide he slunk back into hiding, locked to his rifle and said in his own tongue:

"The Running Eagle will get a pony now, and food, with the scalp of a pale face, too."

At once he went into position for action, and was prepared to fire upon the guide when he came within range of his rifle.

But, though coming directly toward him, John Scott suddenly changed and turned to one side.

He went through the timber, found neither water nor grass and returned on a trail that brought him within range of the Indian's rifle.

But the redskin did not fire. He had discovered the coming of the wagon and its escort, so drew back into better hiding.

Another motive than the coming of the others had prompted him also, for he had recognized the one under cover of his rifle.

"It is Gold Chief, the friend of the Running Eagle. His scalp not for the belt of the Running Eagle.

"But bad pale faces are with him, and would kill red man on sight," and he glanced at the rising storm clouds as though he realized that danger was in them for the white men.

The guide, all unconscious of his danger, turned and rode back to join his comrades, with a result already seen.

The Indian, however, did not leave his place of ambush.

He seemed to feel that the white men would not tarry there in the face of the coming storm, but push on to good shelter.

"The Running Eagle will get good horse," he muttered, and his intention was to follow on the trail of the whites to where they camped and then cut a horse out.

But the halt in the timber he saw with surprise, which was increased as he witnessed the thrilling scenes that followed Gordon Gentry's denunciation of the guide.

The lone chief had mastered the language of his foes, and he knew that the pale faces, maddened by hunger, and suffering, visited their wrath upon the guide, whom he had called his friend.

Twice his rifle was raised as though to save his friend, but the madness of his act came to him and his finger did not touch the trigger.

And there he sat, the savage red man, and saw the white man of boasted civilization play the part of a brute to his fellow man.

He saw the brave young Gold Hunter seek to save his friend, and then how the guide was mercilessly dragged into midair at the end of a rope.

He saw the close call of the young defender, then the coming of the Border King, Buffalo Bill.

Back further into his hiding place sunk the Indian chief at sight of Buffalo Bill.

He knew him as the deadly, yet generous, foe of the red man.

He knew him as one who never fired a shot ruthlessly, but was one to stick to a trail to the bitter end, could almost trail a bird, and knew no fear.

The chief saw him now openly defy the odds he faced, and heard and saw all that followed.

There he crouched, gazing anxiously at the rising clouds, and saw the Gold Hunters file away under the guidance of Buffalo Bill.

But he did not follow on their trail.

His eyes had been riveted upon the limp and motionless form of the one he had called his pale face friend.

He had seen them throw him into the middle one of the three graves, and then dash in the earth upon him.

But the Indian chief had hardly seen the last one of the Gold Hunters disappear, when he leaped from his hiding place and rushed to the grave of his friend.

Like a wild beast he began to dig, throwing the dirt out as a hungry wolf might.

Was it the gold he was after?

At last he reached the form of the guide, and instantly he raised it in his arms and placed it on the outside of the grave.

Leaping out, he took the form in his arms, and bore it rapidly away to the ravine he had made his hiding place.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

That the reader may learn still more of the mysterious Indian chief who had had the guide under cover of his rifle, and later had seen the sad fate that had befallen him.

A couple of hours before the approach of the guide to the timber, the Indian chief had been half a mile from the scene that had been enacted in the timber, and his appearance indicated that he was lying in wait either for game or a foe.

He was just at the mouth of a small canyon, and glad indeed would have been John Scott to have happened upon the spot, for under the shadow of the cliffs grew grass that was long and luscious to the taste of a horse or game.

Up the canyon a few hundred yards a spring oozed out of the base of a solid rock, forming a small basin, which it overflowed, and then lost itself in the ground, which soaked it up.

But this dampness caused the grass and trees thus fed to grow luxuriously in the little canyon.

In a cliff on one side of the canyon, and hidden by the cedars that grew about it, was a cavern that was some dozen feet wide, and ran back into the rocks in two chambers, one of them penetrating several yards, the other much further.

That the smaller cavern was made a living room by the Indian there was every indication, for wood was piled up there, a buffalo and a bear robe were upon the rock flooring, and a bundle of blankets, while, beneath a hole in the rock roof was the ashes of a fire.

A haunch of venison and a wild turkey, along with a large fish, hung outside, showing that the chief was a generous provider for his larder.

The second cavern he evidently used as a stable for his pony, which was hidden near him as he lay at the mouth of the cavern in ambush.

Still waiting there, as he was, the chief suddenly became deeply absorbed in something he had discovered.

His eyes had fallen upon a horseman coming across the plain toward the canyon.

At once he was all attention, and said:

"The Night Hawk is no skulking coyote, for he is coming to meet the Running Eagle as he said he would.

"His scalp will hang at the belt of the Running Eagle to-night, and he can return to his people and not be ashamed to show his face."

So saying, the Indian chief went back to where his pony was hitched, and mounting, rode boldly out of his hiding place.

His manner was hostile from the first,

and yet, though going to meet an evident foe, he did not, savage though he was, take an advantage of him and remain in ambush.

The horseman who was approaching was also an Indian, wearing the war bonnet of a chief, and in the fullest gorgeousness of barbaric splendor of war paint and dress.

He answered the wave of his foe's hand with one of defiance, and bringing his rifle up for use, rode swiftly toward him.

The other also had his rifle ready, and he too dashed toward his enemy, uttering a wild and defiant war cry.

It was instantly answered by the other, who, instead of firing suddenly, dropped on the other side of his horse from his enemy, and begun to ride in a circle.

The Running Eagle turned his pony so as to make him also circle around, though he sat bolt upright in his saddle, as though in defiance of the other's hiding behind his pony.

Thus the two circled around and around, the diameter of the ring growing smaller and smaller.

Now and then one would utter his wild war cry, which would be promptly answered, and often their rifles would be raised and lowered, as though they wished to be sure before they fired.

At last, as though tiring of these circling manoeuvres, the Running Eagle suddenly wheeled his pony and charged straight toward his enemy.

Instantly the rifle of the other cracked, and down went the pony of Running Eagle, a bullet in his brain, and falling so heavily that his rider was thrown with great force.

For an instant he lay as though stunned, and with a wild cry his enemy dashed upon him.

But Running Eagle was quickly upon his feet, his rifle was in his grasp, and leveled.

Then came the crack, just as the rider drew his horse back upon his haunches, as though to protect himself.

It had the desired effect, for the bullet pierced the pony's breast, and he fell back upon his rider.

Ere he could rise, Running Eagle was upon him, knife in hand, and with the terrible war cry of his tribe, he drove it deep into the foe's brawny breast, and drawing it out with the skill gotten from long experience, made a circle around the top of the head, his hand grasping the scalp lock, and the red trophy was his, won in the desperate duel he had fought for some reason with a fellow chief.

It was from this fatal encounter that the Running Eagle went to the timber and came upon John Scott, the guide.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE GRAVE.

The Goldmen, as they liked to be called, had worked diligently in cutting away the large pine that had fallen across the grave.

The change of weather they knew had caused the earth to settle considerably, but all else seemed as they had left it.

They had resigned themselves to the fact that they must remain where they were for the night, though they felt anxious to get on.

The change of weather they knew had been in Buffalo Bill's favor, and they feared his early return, while for the same reason, and knowing that Percy Willard was mounted upon the scout's horse, they feared he had not perished, as they had hoped.

The weather had set in cold and stormy so early in the season, they were wishing for another storm to follow quickly, as soon as they could reach shelter, and thus destroy all trace of their trails, so that Buffalo Bill could not see that their letter left for him was a lie, and he would hence be unable to follow them.

Such was their thoughts as they stood about the grave and watched the men

throw out the earth, hardened by the wetting it had received.

They were looking down with pale faces to the discovery of the body of their one-time friend, the man to whom they owed so much, and so cruelly had murdered.

They did not relish the sight they expected to behold, and a few turned their heads away.

"I didn't think it was so deep as this," said one.

"It didn't seem so to me," remarked another.

But they dug on, with comments passing around the group, until at last the man who had the pick cried out, in a cry allied to horror:

"Look at that!"

"What is it?"

"Another body!"

"What do you mean?"

"We have struck a body we didn't put in the ground!"

"Yes, but—"

"The body is not John Scott's!"

A groan burst from every lip, for the man had suddenly dragged the body out of the earth.

It had been lying upon its face, and it had not the clothing on that John Scott had when buried.

The men all peered down into the grave with staring eyes, while the man who had been wielding the pick grasped the shoulders of the dead man and raised the form in his strong arms.

Another movement and the body was thrown out of the grave.

"An Indian!"

Each voice had spoken; "and he has been scalped," said Gordon Gentry.

"Yes; redskins came along, saw the freshly made grave, and buried one of their dead here," one of the group remarked.

"And the gold?"

The question was asked in tones of dismay.

"It is there, of course," said Gordon Gentry.

The man seized his pick again and went to work with the greatest energy.

Up and down the pick rose and fell, and then he leaped out of the grave and two men sprung into it to throw out the dirt; but no gold was revealed!

The man went to work with his pick again, until he suddenly shouted:

"Bedrock!"

"The gold! the gold!" yelled all.

"Is not here."

The men leaped down themselves until the grave was packed with them. They raved, swore, shouted, and yet all to no use.

The gold was not in the grave!

"What does it mean?" yelled Gordon Gentry.

Only silence answered him.

At last Gentry spoke.

"Men, this is Percy Willard's work!"

A yell answered him.

"He overtook the scout, told him all, and they got the gold."

This seemed to be the opinion until one man said:

"But that Indian?"

This was a stumbling block.

"Yes, the Indian?" came the question.

"It could still be their work, for you know Buffalo Bill scalps his dead, and he might have killed the Indian."

But the redskin was there; and he changed the idea of Gentry that Buffalo Bill had returned with Percy Willard and gotten the body.

"They could not have carried the gold away without more horses and help."

"Where is their trail?"

"This body was put here before the storm."

The last assertion caught every ear, and it was true, as they saw.

The storm had broken within three or four hours after they had left the spot. The hail and sleet had fallen then and filled the grave, and the melting later had hardened the earth as they had found it.

Then, too, the tree had been blown down by the storm.

This did away with all idea of Percy Willard and the scout having secured the gold, for they were with them in the camp until after the storm.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN A DEAD MAN'S SHOES.

The men stood glaring at each other as though each one was guilty of treachery.

Each one was thinking how he could vent his injury and disappointment upon the other.

Gordon Gentry saw this, and grew anxious; he must turn the tide of savage despair that was seizing upon all.

To do this he said: "Comrades, we have been robbed, that is certain; but whether it be Percy Willard's act, or the scout's, is the question. The scout may have had comrades near whom we did not see, and who dug up our treasure as soon as we left. We must have revenge.

"You know that Buffalo Bill is an Indian fighter, and he was on a scouting expedition when he came upon us. You know how bold he was, and my idea is that he had comrades near, and the dead Indian was one they had killed.

"They saw us bury the gold, and while Buffalo Bill was taking us to shelter they robbed us, and afterward he joined them, and that traitor Willard did also.

"It was, in my opinion, a plot all through to rob us, and we must have revenge."

"What can we do, for are we not lost, starving, and will soon freeze?" asked a man, savagely.

"We are not starving, for we have food to last us for some time.

"We are not lost, for we can find our way back to that deserted mining camp, and there wood, water, grass, and game are in plenty.

"We will suffer some, yes, but we can work the old claims, and in the spring come out.

"Don't despair, men, but let us go where life, not death, awaits us, and we will win in the end, mark my words."

Two-thirds of the men cheered this idea, and seeing his advantage, Gentry continued:

"Now, while the trails are fresh we will look about here, and discover all we can; but first let me say that we have no leader, and I move that we elect one."

"What is the matter with you?"

"I am only a self-imposed leader, and there may be others whom you would prefer, so just decide first of all."

There was a hurried parley, and the men cried out for Gordon Gentry as one man, one remarking:

"You got us into this trouble, Gentry, so get us out of it, and remember, as you were the man who accused John Scott, and hanged him, the same rule will apply to you as well."

Gentry shuddered at this. He fastened his eye upon the speaker, who was named Buck Braxton, and a man not to trifle with.

Buck Braxton met his gaze unflinchingly, and said:

"Yes, John Scott said we were to hang him if he betrayed us, and we hanged him because he lost us.

"The man who leads us now must take the same chances, say I, or he is not fit to be the captain of a dozen desperate men."

This was received with cheers; the men were ready for anything.

"Do you accept the responsibility, Gordon Gentry?" asked Buck.

"I do."

"Then you are our captain. You are the one to wear a dead man's shoes."

The men cheered, and one called out:

"We should have a second in command, and I propose Buck Braxton."

A shout greeted the proposal.

All knew that Buck Braxton was a man to stand no nonsense.

He had been bold enough to put a price on the captaincy, so he would be the one to serve.

"Under the same conditions," cried Gordon Gentry.

"Yes, I would refuse otherwise to hold the position," remarked Bruxton.

Then were the two leaders elected.

This over with, and Bruxton called out:

"Now men, while we are accusing Buffalo Bill, Willard, and others, and making numberless enemies, would it not be well to ask what has become of the body of John Scott?"

The question fell like a bombshell in their midst. No one had thought of John Scott. The fact that the dead redskin had been found in the grave completely took their attention off of the man they had buried there.

"A fair exchange is no robbery, it is said," continued Bruxton, "but this was not a fair exchange, as an Indian is not worth a white man, dead or alive, and more, they had the gold, too."

"But about John Scott, is what I would like to know?"

The question none could answer, and all eyes turned upon Buck Bruxton to see if he could solve the mystery he had sprung upon them.

CHAPTER XVII.

LOST IN THE NIGHT.

But Buck Bruxton could not answer his own question.

They expected him to speak, to say more he saw, and so he said:

"Was John Scott dead?"

That second question startled all.

Gordon Gentry at once replied in a sneering way, for he saw that his second was in a fair way to win more favor than he did:

"Dead? Did we not hang him?"

"That does not follow that he was dead."

"Nonsense."

"Well, let us see. He was dragged up, now let's face the end of the rope."

"He might not have been hanged to death when Buffalo Bill came upon the scene, for he was then dropped to the ground and forgotten."

"Then he was tossed into the grave and left there; but, as the gold was taken before the storm, and the body also, might he not have been alive?"

"No!" said Gordon Gentry, firmly.

"Then why was the body not found again with the Indians, for such men do not care to carry a dead man around with them?"

This was a poser. All looked at Gentry for reply.

"I do not understand anything about the whole accursed mystery," he said.

"We lost our gold, we found an Indian in the grave, and the body of John Scott gone, and that is the situation."

"Let us separate while we still have light and try and find some clue."

"This weather is not going to last long, and if we do not get to the shelter of that camp we will all be dead."

This settled the question, and the men started out to see what clue they could find to the mystery.

The excavation was filled up again by Gentry's orders, and the pine log was about to be rolled across the three graves, as though for protection, when Buck Bruxton called out:

"There is one important thing we have forgotten."

"What is it?" impatiently, from Gordon Gentry.

"What about the other graves?"

"Well?"

"Are we sure the men we buried in them are there now?"

It was another question to answer by opening the graves.

"We find Indians in them, too," said one.

The men who had returned from the search for clues, half a dozen in number, at once began the work of digging open the graves.

With a will they worked, and at last the bodies were reached, were taken out and found to be their dead comrades.

"But they have been scalped!" said Buck Bruxton.

It was true! The scalp of each man had been taken.

"This points to Indians, and not to Buffalo Bill," said Bruxton.

"But would Indians take the body of John Scott?" sneered Gordon Gentry.

"They might, if he was still alive, just to enjoy the pleasure of torturing him to death."

Again did Buck Bruxton score against his captain.

The graves were now refilled, the men rolled the log across the three, and all having returned from what had proven a fruitless search, and darkness settling down, they went to camp for supper.

But it was a gloomy meal, and in an ugly mood, they turned into their blankets early.

When the dawn came they were all up, intending to push on to the nearest water, twenty miles away, on the back trail, to halt for breakfast, but suddenly an alarm arose.

Buck Bruxton had made a discovery; three of their very best horses were missing.

A watch was at once begun, but the stake ropes had been pulled up, that was certain, by human hands, and the hard soil thereabout left no trace of a trail.

"Indians," decided Bruxton.

This suggested that it would be best not to stay in a search for the three missing horses, but to push right on their way.

"This is no place to be corralled," Gordon Gentry had said, and the men had all been his way of thinking.

As the gold had been lost, the missing horses did not inconvenience them, and were just so many less animals to care for.

Gentry led the way, and every man was told to be on the watch for Indians, and also to see that no mistake was made in the trail.

Their own trail had been destroyed by the storm, and as they had not expected to return that way, they had not particularly noticed the country through which they had passed.

To make a mistake and not find their way back to the old deserted mining camp they had passed, each man of the party knew would be their doom.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SCOUT'S COMING.

Accustomed as he was to freezing blasts and exposure night and day, Buffalo Bill, wrapped up well, too, could not but bend before the savage winds that swept about him when he left the Gold Hunters in the camp he had taken them to.

He knew well that he was risking his life in going as he did; but he also well knew that the men in the camp must soon get help or would freeze or starve to death.

It was his way, always, to sacrifice himself for others, and he would not turn back.

He would take all chances of getting on his way, and only go into camp when compelled to do so to keep from freezing.

The ground was icy and frozen as hard as a rock, and he had to pick his way, though his horse was rough shod.

Only at a walk could he go, for a faster gait would cause the splendid horse to fall.

Thus his way was slow.

But on he went, and only when darkness was close upon him did he begin to look about for a place to camp.

He found one at last, a break in a cliff, at the base of which there was a dense growth of cedars, and where there was a small brook, but frozen hard.

He knew that his horse must suffer for food, but he broke the ice to give him water, and as he sat in his lone camp,

he could not relish his supper, for the animal who was his comrade must go hungry.

At last he said:

"I'll give you the meal, old fellow, for I can do without bread, and I have more flour."

So the horse ate this and was content, a part being reserved for his breakfast.

Close by the fire the horse lay down, the scout spreading his rubber blankets over him and lying down close to his back.

Thus the night passed without suffering, though not in comfort, and again the ice had to be broken in the brook for water for breakfast.

Once more the scout mounted and went on his way, glad that he had at least come thus far of the distance.

At noon the weather grew warmer, and the horse had a good feed of grass.

Then the trail was resumed and kept up until night, when an excellent camping place was found, and both man and beast were fairly comfortable.

Once more an early start was made by the scout, and the weather growing warmer, he knew that it was no longer a question of doubt, he would safely reach the fort and be able to return and rescue the Gold Hunters, for he would go back prepared for the very worst of weather, and which he knew must now be expected.

But then to rescue a dozen souls, other lives must be risked, for so it has gone through the whole history of the world, and such work it is that makes heroes of men.

Toward night of the fourth day's trail the weary horse and haggard rider were cheered by the sight of a bright spot outlined against the sky.

It was the flag of the United States fluttering in the cold wind, and it waved above Fort Shelter.

Buffalo Bill rode into the fort amid the cheers and shouts of welcome of hundreds of gallant soldiers, who had given up all hope of seeing him alive again.

The fearful blizzard coming on, weeks sooner than usual, had caused officers and men to give him up as lost, for all knew that he had gone to the mountains to the northward to scout about and see if the Indians were threatening a raid, or had been peaceful.

Cowboys attending cattle in exposed ranges, and the poor beasts they cared for, had been frozen to death.

The stage coach had been caught in the blizzard, and came in with the driver dead upon his box.

A hunting party from the fort had come in with the loss of one of their number, and two scouts of Buffalo Bill's company had been found dead on the trail, while help had to be sent to a mining camp twenty miles away in the mountains.

That Buffalo Bill would ever get in alive, even those that knew him best did not believe.

He was a man of luck as well as pluck, but could he withstand that terrible blizzard, was the question.

Imagine, then, the welcome the brave chief of scouts received, for he was the idol of the fort, and one and all cheered him for the danger he had known, and admired him for his indomitable pluck and will.

Haggard, hungry, weary, and suffering, he went straight to headquarters, and was honored by hearing Colonel Miles call out to the sentinel:

"Present arms to him, sir, for he deserves it!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOUBLE RELIEF.

Buffalo Bill fairly dropped into the chair which Colonel Miles motioned him to, after warmly grasping his hand in welcome.

"You got back all right, Cody, and, candidly, we did not expect to see you again."

"It was a fearful blizzard, sir, the worst I ever saw for this season of the year; but will you order gotten ready, sir, blankets and food, and the surgeon, with all haste, sir, for there is a band of forty Indians perishing in the mountains, and I must guide the party of relief there at once."

"You must?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, man, you are scarcely able to stand."

"A square meal and warming up will bring me around all right, sir, by the time the relief is ready, and no other person would be allowed to go there, for they know I am their friend."

"If you can stand it, yes, and I will order the relief at once, and it will be a good thing to help this band."

"It will, indeed, sir, have a good effect; but there are others to help also, and I'll tell you about them as soon as I have braced up."

The scout now went to his quarters, and a cold bath, drink of brandy, and good supper made him, as he said, as good as new.

Then he returned to headquarters and reported the finding of the Gold Hunters, and the frenzy he had found them in.

"Poor fellows, they were maddened at finding no gold, and the sufferings that followed."

"I feel sorry for them, but they must be brought to the fort, and again tried for that murder, and the intended one of the young man whom you say so boldly defended his friend."

"Yes, sir, they are guilty of murder."

"But did they not kill the young fellow after you left?"

"I am anxious about him, sir, but I warned them, and threatened them with the consequences if they did."

"I hope that will cause them to spare him."

"But how far away are they?"

"Over two hundred miles, sir."

"A terrible journey to make in the face of what we have just had in the way of weather."

"Yes, sir, and I fear we will soon have another blizzard."

"I will call for an officer to volunteer, and the men, too."

"Colonel Miles, with your permission, I would like to take only my scouts, sir, a dozen of them, for they are more accustomed to hardships than the soldiers, and it will be a fearfully hard trail."

"Do you mean to go, Cody?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"I will forbid it."

"But, Colonel Miles, no man could find that camp, did snow come on, save myself, who knows the way, as I marked it coming back, and I really do not feel my hard ride now, sir, save in fatigue."

"You can have your way, Cody, for I know you can gauge your own powers best; but you will wish to start soon?"

"I will go to-night to the Indian camp, sir, and my scouts, with the supplies for the Gold Hunters, can follow at dawn, and I will meet them on the trail."

"The surgeon and the soldiers who go to-night can remain in the Indian camp until they can be moved, for I found them in a very bad way."

"How was it, Cody?"

"I saw a smoke, sir, and rode there."

"They were huddled together in a canyon, barely able to keep wood on the fire, and they were out of food."

"They showed fight even then, but I advanced with my hands up, gave them all the provisions I had with me, and, fortunately, had enough for a cup of hot coffee all round."

"I left them my blankets, too, sir, and that was why I came into the fort, half frozen and hungry."

"I told them I would come back, and promised them that I would bring food and clothing."

"Will they stay?"

"They are too weak to run off, sir, so must, and I will go on ahead and relieve their fears, when we get near the camp."

"They are under their big chief, Red Willow, who is very old, and I cannot understand why he is so far from his village with so small a band of his braves; but I asked them no questions, sir."

"It was best."

"I suppose many are frostbitten?"

"Yes, sir, and that is why I wish the surgeon to go along, and they need warm clothing and blankets, too, sir."

"I'll order anything, and both assistant surgeons to go, in case of need."

"The outfit will be ready within half an hour, and I hope you will care well for yourself, also."

"I have reported thoroughly, sir; but let me also say that the men I left in the mountains are in rags, their blankets are worn thin, and—"

"I will send clothing, boots, and all they need, and your scouts can get away at dawn, so you can meet them about noon on the trail, but try and get some rest before they come along, for you will need it after your night ride."

"I'm all right, sir," was Buffalo Bill's cheery reply, and soon after he rode away at the head of the relief party for the Indian band.

CHAPTER XX.

THE INDIAN CAMP.

Though the weather had greatly moderated, the cold was yet severe, and the relief party all were well prepared for their night ride and what was before them.

Ever ready to respond to a call for help, the soldiers went willingly, a score in number, with an officer in charge, the two surgeons, and a couple of ambulances with hospital stores, while pack mules were well laden with supplies.

Had there been any one who wished to grumble at the cold and risk run, the example of Buffalo Bill, just in from an almost fatal ride, would have shamed them.

He rode to the front and said in a cheery tone to the lieutenant in command:

"All ready to pull out, sir."

The order was given, and the party went forth into the darkness and cold.

Buffalo Bill led the way, and the pace he set was a good one, for he intended to get to the rescue as soon as possible, well knowing the great distress the little band of braves was in.

It was a new experience to him, going to the relief of hostiles, the very Indians who were thirsting for his scalp, and with whom the soldiers were constantly at war.

The old Red Willow had seemed to stand the suffering better than his young men.

He was a great chief, the bitter foe of the palefaces, but in his old age had not lately been known to go upon the war-path, and Buffalo Bill had been surprised to find him so far from his village, with a few braves as his only escort.

The Indians had wondered at the act of the great scout; but when he had brought wood for their fires, given them coffee, and had taken all of his own supplies to feed them, giving them his own blankets, they had felt that he was their friend.

"I will come back with help for you, clothing, and food, and I will bring no foes with me, but my red brothers' friends," he had said, and then he sought more wood for them, and mounting his horse, had ridden away.

The first act of the old chief was to try and urge his braves, strengthened by the food and warmth, to mount their horses and fly; but, not half a dozen could have gone, and they only would have ridden off to their death, as all knew.

They must stay there and trust in the word of the great scout.

If his tongue was crooked, then they would die as they had lived, without fear.

The day had passed, night had fallen,

and, crowded together, the poor Indians encircled the fire.

The food had put them in better condition to bear the cold than on the night before.

They had, too, the benefit of the scout's blankets.

But those who had been the worst frostbitten suffered untold anguish, and all had their share of misery.

Unable to sleep with their pains, they kept the fire up as best they could, and but for the scout they would not have had the wood to keep them warm, as none of the braves were able to bring the heavy logs, as he had done.

Their ponies, fortunately, could crop some grass, but not much, and they, too, were in a bad way.

Midnight came and passed, and the suffering braves, in spite of their stoicism, which causes their race to bear all ills in silence, would now and then utter a groan.

Suddenly they heard a hoof fall out in the darkness.

Was it the scout's, or was it a foe?

If the scout, had he come back as a friend, or with soldiers at his back to shoot them down, his kind act being but a trap to keep them there to die?

Another moment, and in their own language a voice said:

"Pa-e-has-ka has come back to help his red brothers."

"My people are here with clothing, blankets, and food, and my medicine men have come to help the great chief, Red Willow, and his young braves."

Then the scout strode into the fire-light, and, rising with an effort to his feet, the old chief said:

"The great White Chief is our brother. He has spoken with a straight tongue."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SCOUT'S TRIUMPH.

Buffalo Bill gazed a moment upon the scene of suffering he beheld, and his heart was glad that he had returned to help the most wretched braves.

"Just in time," he muttered, and then he threw more wood on the fires, and started several more, to have them burning well by the time the relief arrived.

Soon their approach was heard, and the scout could see that old Red Willow and his braves were anxious, in spite of the pain they endured and their enfeebled condition.

But, up came Lieutenant Niles and the surgeons, who both offered their hands to the old chief.

"Cody, if your own heart does not reward you for your noble act in what you have done, nothing will."

"God knows you have won enduring fame by this work," said Lieutenant Niles, in a voice that showed deepest emotion, while the two surgeons scarcely dared trust themselves to speak.

Old soldiers were seen to turn from the fire to hide the glistening tears in their eyes, and our Irish sergeant said, most emphatically:

"By God, Buffalo Bill, but yez should be made a saint for this same escape yer has been afther givin' these poor blackguards."

A laugh followed the sergeant's words and then the ice was broken.

The other fires were burning well now, and tender hands made warm blanket beds about them, while at other fires the two cooks were busy getting a substantial meal and hot coffee for all.

The surgeons set to work examining the worst off of the young warriors, and here and there the word went up:

"A leg must come off of this redskin, and an arm from the one who lies next."

Here it was a foot, there a hand, then fingers, toes and ears, until hardly half a dozen escaped without having to lose some member.

Buffalo Bill explained in their own tongue just what the medicine men had to do to save life, and showed that three of the braves were beyond all hope.

Strange to say the old chief was the least sufferer by the cold and hardships, and he told his braves that Pa-e-has-ka was their friend, that the great medicine men of the pale faces knew just what to do, and they must submit or die.

In silence they did submit, and the night of agony in that Indian camp none who witnessed it ever forgot.

The Indians bore their pain without a groan.

They would not take chloroform, and submitted in silence to all operations.

The soldiers were as gentle as women in all they did for them.

Warm underclothing had been put upon all; they had been given whiskey, had been fed and put under warm blankets, and each brave had gazed fixedly into the face of those who served him, as though to indelibly imprint upon his memory every feature.

Thus hours passed, and before dawn the work was done, the guard set, and the tired relief turned in to rest, Lieutenant Niles calling out: "This night stamps you, William Cody, with an undying record."

"If you don't turn in now and go to sleep, I shall order Surgeon Powell to chloroform you."

But Buffalo Bill had already become lost to the world in slumber, having crawled into his blankets a few moments before.*

Buffalo Bill had spread his blankets apart from the camp. He knew well what was before him and did not care to be aroused until late in the morning.

It was nearly noon when he did wake, and then was welcomed by the soldiers with a cheer.

The braves nodded to him, and old Red Willow arose and grasped his hand with the remark:

"Pa-e-has-ka the friend of my people. The Red Willow will not forget."

The cooks were preparing dinner, and, greatly refreshed by his sleep, Buffalo Bill ate a hearty meal, and then prepared to go out and meet the second relief party he had to lead.

He explained to the old chief that he was to guide a party to help some pale faces in the mountains, and who would die but for his coming.

So he parted with all in the camp, promising to stop upon his return, for he knew that they would be still there, and Lieutenant Niles had begun to build cabins for all, and had sent a courier back to the fort to report the exact situation and ask for more provisions.

The soldiers cheered the scout as he rode off, and the braves gave a war-cry in his honor, led by the Red Willow himself.

An hour after Buffalo Bill saw coming along the trail the party he had gone out to meet, and he was just in time to head them off.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN ALARM.

"The colonel has sent me with a complete outfit," said Buffalo Bill, as he counted fourteen scouts in the coming party, a dozen pack horses and several extra animals.

When the men came within hail they gave their chief a cheer, and Texas Jack spurred forward and called out:

"Glad to find you, chief, and Colonel Miles told me to give you his best wishes and tell you that he hoped you would take particular care of William F. Cody on this trip."

Buffalo Bill laughed and said:

"The colonel is very kind."

"But, come, pards, we will push right on, for I am beginning to fear that this weather will not last, and I'd like to

*The relief of this Indian band is a fact, and no act of William Cody's life stands out more nobly. Surgeon Frank Powell, now Mayor of La Crosse, Wis., was the one who accompanied the expedition and so well did his duty.—The Author.

†J. B. Omohundro—a Texas Scout, who was the boon comrade of Buffalo Bill.—The Author.

strike the camp of the Gold Hunters so as to be among them during another blizzard."

The men answered by quickening their pace, Texas Jack riding by the side of Buffalo Bill.

Then followed half the force, two abreast, and next came the pack animals and extra horses, with the balance of the scouts bringing up the rear.

As the men had already halted for their noon meal there was nothing to prevent their pushing on until dark.

They were a splendid lot of men.

Most of them were six feet in height, well built, wiry fellows, with great broad shoulders, as strong as lions, and active as cats.

They were dressed in buckskins, top boots, slouch hats, with enormous brim, wore their hair long, were well armed and would follow the lead of Buffalo Bill to perdition if he took that trail.

With such a band Buffalo Bill was not afraid to meet a hundred Indians, and could face blizzards and all else that might bar their way.

The traveling was not bad, and he was determined to make the return to the Gold Hunters camp in three days, for within that time he expected that the good weather would leave them.

Until close upon dark he pushed on, and then a good camping place was found.

"Sixty miles and more to our credit to-day, boys, and more must be made to-morrow and next day."

"But remember there are a dozen lives depending upon us, and I know that no man will grumble if I push hard on the trail."

The answer that greeted the chief of scouts' remark assured him that the men were there to follow his lead without a complaint.

They looked well to their horses, had supper, and the chief, feeling certain that there was no need for a guard, he told them all to turn in and get a good night's rest.

This they did, and the early morning found them once more in the saddle.

"Jack, if we don't get another blizzard by to-morrow night it will surprise me," said Buffalo Bill at the second day's night camp, which they made after a ride of over seventy miles.

"It looks that way to me, too, Bill."

"But I hope it will hold off, for you say we can make the camp by night."

"Yes, I think so; but look out for that blizzard, for the clouds are beginning to look nasty, as those English noblemen who visited the fort this fall always said."

"Yes; they have an ugly look."

"I shall break camp so as to be in the saddle at dawn."

This was done, and the men could all see that there was trouble ahead.

The skies had become overcast, and were hanging very low, the clouds looming up over the horizon as black as ink and scurrying along like deer.

As they were nearing the noon camping place, and which Buffalo Bill had said was a fine one, well sheltered, should the blizzard strike them there, they suddenly saw smoke ahead. "Can they have started toward the fort, fearing I was not coming?" said Buffalo Bill, and he dashed ahead.

But a short ride answered his question, for he halted suddenly and called out:

"Indians, men!"

"Be upon your guard!"

And Indians they were, half a hundred of them.

They had seen the storm would break soon, and were seeking what shelter they could in the very place where Buffalo Bill had intended to camp.

They were building wickiups, pulling grass for their ponies, and gathering wood.

But they had seen the coming scouts and wild cries ran through their camp giving the alarm and calling all the band to battle.

Quickly they replied, and by the time

the scouts were on their guard a volley of rifle balls and a shower of arrows came flying toward them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MAN'S HUMANITY TO MAN.

"Poor fools! They were hurrying back to their village from some red raid they had been on, and will listen to no reason, no appeal."

"We will have to fight for it, boys, but we will try and stampede them quickly, then capture their camp, and if we find a wounded brave I will be glad, for he may be useful."

So said Buffalo Bill after he had risked his life in riding forward to try and hold a powwow with the Indian band.

He had held his hands above his head in token of peace, and he had called out to them in their own tongue that they were their friends, that they would help them, while as they were, they would freeze to death in the coming blizzard.

But all in vain. The scout was only shot at for his goodness.

Returning to his men he said that it was a strange thing to have befriended the band back on the trail and now have to kill there.

But so it was, for the Indians would listen to no parley.

They felt confidence in their numbers, and hoped to capture the whole pale face outfit and thus benefit themselves.

"Open heavily, men, with your repeating rifles, and we'll soon stampede them."

"Then charge for the camp."

Such had been Buffalo Bill's orders, and the men obeyed.

The rapid rattle of the repeating rifles was an astounding surprise to the Indians.

It seemed like the fire of a regiment, and as there numbers began to lessen they did just what Buffalo Bill had said they would, stampeded, as soon as the scouts began to charge them.

So rapid was the fire, so swift the rush of the scouts, so wild their yells that the redskins ran off, leaving their camp, their outfit, dead and dying comrades.

In a moment the scouts were in upon the camp, and seeing this the desperate band that had stampeded knew that they had but rushed to their death in the face of the coming blizzard.

Without food and with scant clothing they had but exchanged death by the bullet for death by cold and hunger, unless they could rush back and take their camp.

But to do this they had to carry out the traditional methods of their race and have a council of war, and shivering and in almost despair they built a fire and gathered about it.

Meanwhile Buffalo Bill and his victorious scouts had entered the camp to find half a dozen dead and double that number wounded.

Instantly Buffalo Bill had spoken to one of the wounded braves in his own tongue and told him he had wanted to be their friend—told him how he had found their old chief, Red Willow, and his band of young warriors, and helped them, and to prove his friendship he would now go on with his braves and leave their camp for the others to return.

He would also leave them a bundle of blankets and some clothing, along with food for them.

Further, he told him that he must mount his pony and go after his stampeded brothers and tell them what Buffalo Bill had done and bring them quickly back to camp that they might bury their dead, look after their wounded, and prepare for the terrible night that was coming on.

The young brave seemed almost too much dazed by what he heard to understand that it was true.

He was wounded in the shoulder, and one of the scouts, with some knowledge of surgery, extracted the bullet and dressed the wound for him.

Then the others were brought near the fire, the food, blankets and clothing which

Buffalo Bill knew could be spared from the generous supplies sent by Colonel Miles, were spread out before them, and, having eaten a hearty lunch, the scouts mounted to depart.

Away from the camp they rode, just as the Indians, singing their wild war song, though shivering with cold, were coming forward to make a desperate effort to retake their camp.

The wounded brave or messenger met them half way, there was a halt and a pow-wow, and the scouts dashed in, Buffalo Bill remaining in hiding to see the return to camp.

He saw them go back in a dazed way, not understanding it all, but confident that he had saved the band from certain death, he dashed on after his scouts.

All were riding rapidly now, for it needed no telling for them to see that the blizzard would strike them before night.

They had given up to the Indians the only good shelter between there and the Gold Hunters' Camp, and that was yet thirty miles away.

It would be a desperate ride for life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE FACE OF A BLIZZARD.

Buffalo Bill, once he felt sure that the Indian band would not perish, settled himself to the serious work of saving his own party.

He had regretted having to fire upon the Indians, after the good deed toward old Red Willow, and his braves would do so much toward bringing about peace with the tribe, but it was a necessary evil.

Did he not do so the Indians would have charged upon him, believing he was too weak to oppose them.

As it was, they had been taught a very severe lesson, then fed and cared for afterward, while the whole band had been saved from starvation and freezing by his act.

But now the duty lay to get to shelter before the blizzard should strike them.

From the way the clouds had gathered, all the weather-wise among the scouts felt sure that it would be even more severe and lasting than had been the last one.

Did it come on to snow heavily the traveling would be bad indeed, and in a driving storm it would be very hard to find the way.

So the chief of scouts determined that the horses must suffer, and he led the way at a canter, his men needing no orders to keep close up to him.

"I am glad we brought those sacks of corn, Jack, for the horses will be kept alive until the snow leaves the ground," said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, indeed."

"But what kind of shelter have they?"

A pine thicket that is too thick to ride through.

"The limbs grow to the very ground, and a small space was found clear, and over this a shelter was built of trees and bushes, and a little brook just upon three sides."

"I tell you those Gold Hunters worked hard, and it is all that saved their lives."

"And they have a good shelter for themselves?"

"Oh, yes; and we can crowd in all right, for the time being; but this is too slow," and glancing up at the clouds the pace was increased.

Over the plain, up and down hills, through canyons the scout led his men, and, though their horses began to show the pace at which they were kept, the gait was still kept up.

It was a ride for life and no mistake.

With no water nearer than the camp, no shelter for man or beast, they knew that they must not be caught by the threatening storm.

At last the air was full of misty flakes, and as they began to fall the wind rose and howled louder and louder.

Buffalo Bill's face was stern now, but determined.

He had several miles to go, but even then should the blizzard swoop down upon them they would be in great danger.

On, on they rode, the horses needing no urging, for their instinct told them that man, their master, was riding for shelter.

Thicker grew the flakes, louder moaned the wind, but it swept the ground of the snow as it fell, so that the trail was not hidden.

At length Buffalo Bill gave a long, wild halloo.

He knew that the camp of the Gold Hunters was just ahead, up the canyon.

No answer came, however.

The halloo was repeated.

Still no answer.

Another moment he dashed forward.

There was the shelter in the pines, the shelter of the horses also.

Wood was piled up in large quantities where the fires had been.

But the ashes were cold, not a soul was visible.

Instead a flock of coyotes dashed out of the shelter their instinct had driven them to seek.

"They are gone!" cried the scout.

Then he added quickly:

"This is no time to look for reasons, pards, so get to work, for look there?"

He pointed to the blinding wave of sleet now driving down the canyon.

The horses were rushed into their shelter, unsaddled, run to the brook and allowed to crop what grass they could before the snow covered it.

The Gold Hunters' shelter was cleaned out, blankets were spread, extra boughs were cut and piled around, and fresh pine straw put on the ground for better warmth.

The two fires were built up, and the axes rung out merrily as trees were felled, stripped and dragged near for use.

The men worked like demons, the horse shelter was made more secure, and only an entrance was left open, the stores were stowed in with the men, and night fell with the men ready to meet the blinding, furious, appalling blizzard that was upon them.

Howling in fright and pain the coyotes crept up close to the shelter of their foes to get what protection they could, and wild birds shrieked dismally as they sought the densest parts of the pines and niches in the cliffs overhanging the canyon.

"One hour later and we would all have perished, for neither man nor beast could have withstood this blizzard without shelter," said Buffalo Bill.

All knew the truth of his words, and two of the men having supper ready they crowded into the shelter to eat it, the interior lighted by a couple of lanterns the chief had brought along most wisely.

The horses had been put in their shelter, the opening closed with rubber blankets, as had the retreat of their riders, and there the latter sat listening to the cracking of falling trees upon the cliffs, the thundering down the mountains of loosened rocks and the terrific roar of the wind.

To look out was but to see a blinding mass of flying ice, which no man could face long and live.

It was not long before the scouts were driven to the warmth of their blankets, the fires having been packed high with logs to keep through the night.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FAKE LETTER.

"The worst night I ever saw in all of my experience."

So said Buffalo Bill as he looked out of the secure shelter which had saved their lives.

"And the day will be no better," added Texas Jack.

"You are right, Jack."

"But, now to brighten up the fires, cut holes in the ice to water the horses, and have breakfast."

"We will give the poor animals a

quart of corn each to warm them," said Buffalo Bill.

Muffled up until they looked like bears, half of the men followed Buffalo Bill out to the horse shelter, while others got to work building up the fires, dragging up more wood, and cutting holes in the ice.

The two cooks did what they could toward getting breakfast, and even with the fire sheltered as it was it was hard work.

"Where are the Gold Hunters?" was the question constantly asked by the scouts, and to which no one could give answer.

The horses were found to have passed the night fairly well, sheltered, as they were, and the scouts had reason to congratulate themselves, after all, for, without the warm retreats lay dozens of coyotes frozen to death, and half a dozen deer were frozen stiff.

"Now, that's what I call clever, coming here to supply our larder," said Texas Jack, and he had the deer dragged up near the fire.

"Oh, those poor Indians!"

"If I dared I would try and get back to see them," said Buffalo Bill.

And he meant it.

But, outside of the snowy trail and the cold, they would be likely to shoot him for his humanity if he was successful in reaching them.

"They can stand more than we can, it is true, and they have stood it, I guess, by hugging the fire among the rocks."

"I am glad we left them food and blankets, for without them they would have gone the way of the coyotes," said the chief.

After breakfast pipes were lighted, and as Buffalo Bill sat in the retreat, looking out of the opening at the storm, which had not moderated in the least, he saw a pile of rocks around which the wind had whirled and thus left them bare of snow.

He knew that it was not there when he had left, and he at once decided that it was a cache.

Quickly he stepped outside, the stones were thrown off, and away fluttered the letter left by Gordon Gentry.

A chase secured it, however, and once more seated in the shelter, the chief unfolded and read the lines of the new captain of the Gold Hunters.

His face darkened as he did so, and twice he read it over to himself without making a comment.

Then he said:

"Men, the Gold Hunters have gone, as you all know, so our journey here is apparently useless."

"But this letter is from them, and I will read it to you."

"It pretends to be an explanation of their going; but I have my own ideas, yet would like to hear the opinion any of you have to express."

The letter was then read slowly aloud by Buffalo Bill, and he waited for comments.

Texas Jack said:

"I was up in this country once with you, chief, you remember, but you know it better than I do."

"Yes."

"Then what mining camps are to the north of us that a returning party could come from?"

"There are none; nothing but Indian country there."

"Ah! and is there a trail down this canyon?"

"None, for we are almost at the head of it, and it ends in a cliff over which the brook tumbles."

"I see."

"And how far is it to the mouth?"

"A mile or more."

"Is there a regular trail there?"

"No."

"We came here by no trail save the one I took going to the fort."

"And the nearest trail that a party could come?"

"Is where those Indians are en-

camped in that direction, and forty miles the other way."

"Then no party would come this way?"

"Not unless, they were lost, Jack."

"Then their story looks transparent?"

"Decidedly."

"And they have gone to the settlements to the north, they say?"

"Yes."

"There are none?"

"Oh, yes, as you know, two hundred miles away, and a mining country, too; but to get there they have got to round the Great Divide that lies between here and there and thus travel four hundred miles."

"Then where have they gone, sir?"

"They did not go toward the fort, for they would have had to pass us, or to the northward, or the Red Willow's braves would have jumped them, while if they have gone southward, it is a long trail, and I will soon know."

"My idea is that they have gone on their back trail, and they had a motive for it, too," said Buffalo Bill, impressively.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TO TRAIL THE RUNAWAYS.

The scouts all knew when their leader was deeply moved.

They saw now that he was much impressed by the departure of the Gold Hunters.

They knew that the letter they had left the chief regarded as a lie from beginning to end.

Buffalo Bill again read the letter of Gordon Gentry, and then said:

"When I met these men they were in rags, their wagon did not have a week's food at half rations, their horses were in poor condition, and they claimed to be unsuccessful miners returning home."

"There was trouble among them, they had hanged their guide and leader, because he lost his way, they claimed; and a splendid young fellow I took a great shine to, had been his defender and killed two of the outfit."

"For that they intended to murder him, too."

"But I got there just at that time, chipped in, and brought them here."

"They had no gold to speak of with them, save what they had in their belts; but in their condition they might have buried it, yes, at the very place I found them, intending to seek life first and return in the spring for their treasure."

"Sure," said Texas Jack.

"Now their wagon is here, as you see, so they feared to take that."

"No party has come near here for them to join, and with their leader out of the way, the young man I spoke of done for, those he killed making two less, the rations they had, the provisions I left them, and mounted on their horses, which had had a rest, they could take the back track, go to where they started from and get through the winter in some way, for there must be other miners where they have been."

"This looks the right idea," said a scout.

"Well, you see, their letter says that the young man started after me at the time I left, as I doubtless knew."

"Yes, sir."

"That young man was the best plainsman of the lot, and he was no fool to take big chances in that freezing weather unless he was well prepared."

"They would not have allowed him to take food and blankets from them, and if he got them, he slipped away with them."

"If he did not he had to fly for his life, and they drove him off to die, and that was murder."

"We have found no skeleton of horse or man on the way, so he could not have followed on after me."

"No, sir."

"The men were all splendidly armed and had plenty of ammunition, and so they chanced the back trail rather than be relieved by me and taken to the fort,

where they would have been tried for the murder of their leader and that young man."

"In my opinion that is just what they have done."

"It looks so, chief!"

"I guess you are right."

"Sure."

"You've got the right trail, sir."

"You always hit it right, chief."

"But what can be done about it, sir?"

So the comments had run on, until the last question deserved an answer.

After a moment of thought Buffalo Bill said:

"With the supplies they had they could run for a couple of weeks on short rations, and mounted, they could go a long way in a week, without their wagon to retard them."

"Ah, yes; they could get well away."

"But just how long has it been, sir?" asked Texas Jack.

"I ran upon them just one week ago to-day."

"I left them to go to the fort the following afternoon, and say they got out the next day, they have had five days the start."

"Sure."

"Give them but four, and forty miles to the day, and you see they are a long way off."

"If they have gone the back trail they came, I know of no mines under a couple of hundred miles in that direction, and I have heard that they were abandoned as no good."

"Further beyond a hundred miles there is a good paying mining country, and it is said there are hundreds of miners up there."

"I guess they have gone there, sir."

"Doubtless."

"It is there, at least, I shall look for them, as soon as I am sure."

"But do you expect to follow them, chief," asked Texas Jack, with all the others surprised at the words of Buffalo Bill.

"Oh, yes."

"But this storm will have destroyed all trails, perhaps have frozen the outfit to death."

"It is my duty to find out."

"I came here to rescue those men."

"They are not here, and after this blizzard is over, before another storm comes I will find out where they are."

"I warned them not to kill that young man."

"Either they have done so, or driven him out to die, and they were already murderers, hence a dangerous band to be at large."

"It is my duty to find them, and I will, track them where I may," and the scouts saw determination written on every feature of their chief's face.

But there was no backing down in that band of heroes.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TELL TALE LETTER.

Through the whole day the blizzard continued to make man and beast uncomfortable.

The scouts realized how bitter would have been their sufferings had they been in a less complete shelter.

They had the satisfaction of feeling, however, that the snow, falling that early in the season, would not last long, the sun quickly melting it.

Upon the morning of their third day they awoke to find the fierce wind had lulled, the sun arose in a cloudless sky, the intense cold no longer greeted them and the horses were neighing to get out of their close confinement.

They were quickly turned out, the ice broken for them to get water, and they could get what picking could be found in places the snow did not cover.

"It's a rough country to the northward, the way to go, pard, so we will wait until to-morrow and give the horses all they can get of grass, for with this sun the snow will soon run off," said Buffalo Bill.

It proved as he had said, for the snow melted as quickly as it had come, and the horses had a feast.

The start was made the next morning in weather that was only cool, and Buffalo Bill led the way directly back toward the waterless timber on the edge of the barren plain, and where the Gold Hunters had left three graves to mark their short stay there.

The scouts were not long in discovering that their chief was not going by guess work, that he knew just what he was about, for he rode directly to the spot where the Gold Hunters had camped during the day and night of their stay there.

"This camp was not here when I was in this timber last."

"See, they made a night camp here, and now to see why they came here to stop, where there was no water or grass."

"We will have a look at those graves over in yonder timber, so we stay here for some little time," said the chief.

With this he dismounted and walked over to the timber.

When the others came over and joined him, they found him standing by the three graves.

"Jack, the centre grave was where they buried their leader, and the other two are where the men killed by that young man Willard were buried."

"I watched closely, and I did not see them search the guide's body before burying it, and he certainly must have had something about him as to who he was."

"Now I told you these men had come on the back trail, for had they gone southward they would not have come this way."

"Here is their camping place, this tree has fallen across the grave and been cut in two, and is now placed over the three."

"This is proof to me that the grave, or graves, were open, and it may be that before I showed up that day they had buried their gold in one of the graves."

"It is worth seeing, however."

The scouts agreed with their chief, and picks and shovels were gotten from the packs and the men set to work.

They opened the middle grave first.

They were positively startled when the scalped head of an Indian appeared, and there was no white man found in the grave.

"This grave was dug large for the guide and the young man."

"An Indian's body is in it now, though I saw a white man buried here," and Buffalo Bill was himself mystified.

But, he waited until the other graves were opened.

A white man's body was in each, but their scalps had been cut from their heads!

"More food for thought," muttered Buffalo Bill, and he gave the orders to rebury the bodies.

But, suddenly, he called out:

"Search the bodies first, thoroughly."

This was done, and upon one body was found a letter.

It was addressed in a feminine hand to:

"Lucas Shelton, Esq."

The rest of the address was torn off but the postmark was there, and agreed with the one at the heading of the letter. It had been written from a village in Missouri, and dated some four months before.

This letter Buffalo Bill read, and said:

"It is a letter from a girl to her lover, and she is looking forward to his return with hope and pleasure."

"She says that she knows Captain John Scott will lead them to riches, and safely back home, as all the neighbors have confidence in him."

"Also, the letter states that all regret they have had to suffer such hardships, and those who had been killed in their fights with Indians were deeply mourned."

"She hoped that young Percy Willard had recovered from his wound, and the heroine her lover wrote the youth had

displayed was just what all had expected of him, while his mother felt most proud of her brave son.

"The letter is signed Belle Lester, and it tells me where to find out all I care to know about those Gold Hunters."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TRAILING THE MYSTERY.

The discovery of the telltale letter was what Buffalo Bill had wished.

He wanted to find some clue as to who the Gold Hunters were, where they were from, and all that he could about them.

He had found out that they had all doubtless come from the same locality in Missouri; that they were supposed to be under a leader that would lead them to fortune, and this leader they had hanged.

The young man who had been a "hero," they had also intended to hang. They had suffered hardships, had had fights with Indians, and the letter had hinted that they had been successful in their enterprise, had found gold.

What motive had such men for wishing to get rid of their leader and his defender, the scout had thought.

Then came the questions:

"Where is the body of Captain John Scott?"

"Why is an Indian in his grave?"

"Who scalped that Indian?"

"Why were the two men in the other graves also scalped?"

These questions were asked over and over again.

But no answers were returned.

That the man Lucas Shelton was the one whose return was hoped for by the writer of the letter had lost his life at the hands of Percy Willard, whom he had spoken of so highly in his letter to Belle Lester, there was no doubt.

"She looks in vain, poor girl, for his return," said Buffalo Bill.

Then he began to feel that her lover must have been one who had sided with Gordon Gentry for some reason.

The depth of the middle grave convinced Buffalo Bill that gold had been hidden in it, the body being placed over it for secure hiding.

The scouts thought the same.

The Gold Hunters had surely returned there and gotten their treasure.

If Percy Willard had left them, as their letter had stated, then he knew of the buried gold, and they feared to trust him.

They feared that he might tell secrets about them that would cause them trouble.

Hence their determination to fly, and try to fool Buffalo Bill.

So it looked to the scouts.

But the absence of the body of John Scott was a puzzler.

Another was that the Indian that held his place was scalped, as well as the two white men.

Why was this?

The graves had been opened after the first storm, that was an assured fact.

"Now, about the body of the guide, that I saw put in that middle grave, and about the Indian, scalped, and the two white men also scalped."

"Put on your thinking caps, pards," said Buffalo Bill, and he walked apart from the men, after telling them to re-bury the bodies.

He was evidently "hunting his mind," as the men expressed it, for some clue, some trail.

"Let the chief alone, and he'll get there," said one.

The others were of the same way of thinking, and all busied themselves to find out just what had happened there.

At last Buffalo Bill called out:

"Jack."

"Ay, ay, chief!"

"Come here."

The Texan walked over to where his chief was, and the latter said:

"Jack, that redskin was a Sioux?"

"Yes."

"From his rig and ornaments a chief."

"You are right, for Tim Hale said he thinks it was a young chief by the name

of Night Bird, one of the worst foes of the whites, and who is trying to be head chief when old Red Willow dies.

"Tim Hale took a good look at him, and knew the chief he said it was."

"Why should he be scalped, if a Sioux, for there are no other tribes about here?"

"True."

"I know of the chief you speak of, and he is a disturbing element in the tribe; but who scalped the two white men?"

"Don't know."

"They were dug up and scalped?"

"Yes."

"Where is the body of the guide?"

"Don't know."

"Jack, there is some one else about here than those Gold Hunters."

"It looks so."

"Now, those Indians we met and fought might have scalped the two white men, but not the chief."

"Then, too, old Red Willow's band may have come from this way; but they did not do it unless right after the bodies were buried, for I came upon them three days after, you know."

"Yes."

"And Red Willow would scalp the white bodies, but not—Jack, I have an idea."

"Yes, chief, you generally have."

"You know how different chiefs quarrel and challenge each other to fight duels?"

"Yes."

"Now, old Red Willow, knowing his young rival's designs, may have been hot after him, and their bands have met, for the second lot we saw may have been Night Bird's."

"You are right."

"Now, if Red Willow killed Night Bird in a duel he would have scalped him."

"Sure."

"That would account for the young chief being scalped."

"Yes."

"And the two white bodies being scalped also."

"Correct."

"But the Indian occupies the grave of the guide, John Scott, so now what has become of the latter's body?"

"I give it up, Pard Bill; but you just keep on as you are, and if you don't ferret the whole thing out I am greatly mistaken," said Texas Jack.

"I shall go on, Jack, until I let daylight into this mystery."

"But now to have dinner, and then we'll decide what to do," and the two rejoined their comrades, who had filled up the graves and left all as they had found it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DIVIDED TRAILS.

The scouts saw that their chief was mystified, that he was at a loss to account for what had happened.

He had carefully put away the letter found in the grave, and addressed to Lucas Shelton, for he seemed to consider that of importance for the future.

After dinner was over Buffalo Bill said:

"Men, we will leave here within half an hour and our trails will divide."

All looked curious at this.

Then the chief continued: "I have found enough here to decide to make a headquarters at the canyon we have left."

"You will take six men back there with you, Sombrero Sam, and go to work building cabins, and making shelter for the horses."

"In the canyon the snow will not lie long, but you can cut grass so as to have hay for the worst weather, cut wood and make it a regular winter camp."

"Yes, sir."

"You will return there from here."

"I am ready, sir."

"I shall go on with the rest of the men, save Pony Pete, whom I shall send back to the fort with dispatches, saying what I have discovered, and asking for full supplies to be sent to our winter camp, with corn and all we need."

"The rest of the men will continue on with me until I am sure which trail the Gold Hunters took. Then, if they have pushed on, Texas Jack and I will take a good lot of supplies and follow."

"If we find them, Jack or I will come back for the force. The party we have can then return to our winter camp, and Sombrero Sam you will be in charge, and I feel will get all snug and comfortable."

"We will, chief."

"But there is a duty which you must perform."

"Yes, sir."

"Of course, you must look out for blizzards; but all other times you must keep a couple of men from dawn until dark watching this timber and its approaches."

"I am sure that there is some camp near here, and I wish to know all about it."

"We'll do all we can to find out, chief."

"That is just what I wish, and that is all that I wish, for, while remaining in hiding yourself, you must find out the mystery hanging about this region."

"Now, men, Jack and I will supply ourselves well from the outfit, taking two pack horses, and you, Pony Pete, will start for the fort at once, as I have written the dispatches, and guide the relief back to the winter camp, with four more of my scouts which I will ask Colonel Miles to send, for nothing will be done this winter but wait, I feel sure, as far as military operations against the Indians are concerned."

"The rest of you men will go with Jack and myself as I said."

The scouts saw that the chief was on the Gold Hunters trail to stay.

They at once set to work and prepared for the divided trails, while he wrote the dispatches to Colonel Miles.

Receiving them, Pony Pete started off alone to take advantage of the good weather and get well on his way.

Sombrero Sam and the others followed more slowly soon after, going back to the camp up the canyon, and Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack and the remaining five started off across the plain.

Buffalo Bill led the way at a brisk pace and a score of miles were put behind them while the sun was yet well above the horizon.

The chief was watching the range ahead, and studying its contour well.

He was anxious to find a break, the place where the Gold Hunters had come through with their wagon, or gone over.

At the base of the range was some hard soil, but soft enough to leave a wagon track.

And right here he found a wagon track, the trail of only one, and the Gold Hunters had made their last camp at that spot before crossing the plain to the timber, where death had come into their midst.

What pleased Buffalo Bill most, however, was the discovery of further tracks right there, and they were turned in the other direction.

There was no wagon track with this trail, and all knew that it marked the Gold Hunters' return whither they had come.

"Pards, they did not camp here returning, but pushed on to where they knew water and grass could be found in the range, and if I mistake not, we will not have to go many miles."

It was as the scout said, a camping place was found before sunset, and there was a tiny stream there and scattering grass, also the signs of the Gold Hunters' camp.

The scouts went into camp for the night, and feeling sure he was right, Buffalo Bill started the five men back to the winter quarters, saying to the scout in charge, Larry Loundes:

"Larry, you will reach camp before night."

"Keep an eye on the timber as you go, however."

"Jack and I will push on, and we are well prepared even to face a blizzard."

"But we are going to find those Gold Hunters."

The scouts gave a cheer, and Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack pushed on up the range.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE GOLD HUNTERS' RETREAT.

When the Gold Hunters started upon the back trail from the timber that sheltered the three graves, they were as much mystified, if not more, than was Buffalo Bill.

They had found the man whom they had hanged and buried metamorphosed into an Indian.

They had found the Indian scalped.

Also, had they found their two dead comrades had been taken from their graves and scalped.

These were surprises, certainly, but mysteries as well.

Was John Scott taken from that grave dead or alive?

Had he been dug up by Indians or white men?

The worst blow to the Gold Hunters, however, had been the loss of their gold.

They were poorer by far than when they had come to the mines.

Then they had been well equipped and had ample supplies.

Now they were in rags, horses and men were lean and haggard, their gold was gone, the winter had set in, and starvation, or death by exposure, stared them in the face.

Certainly their case was a pitiable one, and they could not but consider how, had they not attacked their leader, Buffalo Bill would have met them, taken them to shelter, and then come with relief, and they and their gold would have been safe.

But they had taken the wrong way of getting out of trouble, so had to bear the consequences.

As they moved on they came to the camp where they had halted before their last march to the timber.

They would not halt there, but pushed on to where they knew there was water and some grass up in the mountains.

There they halted for the night.

But their rations had been cut down, wood had to be brought a long way, it was cold, and the night passed in wretched discomfort.

A scanty breakfast the next morning and the march was resumed.

All were sullen and silent.

There was no cheery leader to urge them on, as John Scott had done.

There was no bright fellow, such as Percy Willard had been, to make them laugh and forget their sufferings.

It was a march of worn-out horses, fagged, half-fed men, grim and in ugly mood.

Their noon camp was where John Scott had made his mistake and gone off on the trail that had led to their misfortunes.

They all talked it over and denounced him for it.

And yet Gordon Gentry and others knew that the plot had been hatched long before to get rid of John Scott and others, that the gold might go the further divided among a few.

The men were glad to push on, for the weather was chill in the mountains, and the weatherwise predicted another blizzard.

If it caught them away from the proper shelter, all knew that the gold trail would end in their doom, then and there.

Gordon Gentry saw their ugly looks and remembered the doom that hung over the leader of the Gold Hunters, if they went wrong.

So he pushed the horses hard.

All through these wild, rugged mountains game was scarce, there was little water, and only now and then could grass be found for the horses.

They had suffered on their downward trail, and they now suffered the more.

Colder and colder grew the chill winds, the skies became overcast, and the

began to fear another blizzard would break upon them before they reached the deserted mining camp.

Had it done so, there is no doubt but that another frenzy would have seized upon them, and Gordon Gentry's doom would have been sealed.

At last, with the air misty with icy particles, the heavens dark and threatening, and the wind roaring in the mountains, they came in sight of the valley-like canyon in which was the deserted mining camp.

It was hidden away in a heavy growth of pine timber, under the shelter of overhanging cliffs, and with a stream running swiftly through the canyon.

There were meadow lands upon each side of the stream, good grazing the year round for the cattle, and a herd of deer scurried away at the approach of the Gold Hunters, several falling under their fire.

"Good luck, pards, for we'll have a fine supper, and there is plenty of grass for our horses."

"Wood and water are right at hand, and the cabins will shelter us and all our cattle—see!" and Gordon Gentry seemed to forget all sufferings as he dashed into the pines and halted before one of the dozen log cabins that had formed the mining camp of other unfortunate fortune hunters.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BY A NARROW MARGIN.

The camp was an ideal one for the winter, so well was it sheltered from the north by the cliffs, and down in the canyon by the pine timber.

The stream ran too swiftly to freeze; the snow would not lie long down in the bottom of the canyon, so grass was plentiful, while wood could be had for the gathering.

The others who had been there had seemed to have laid in their supply of wood about each cabin, and then departed before the winter came on.

The men chose the largest and best cabin, cleaned it out, built fires in the large fireplaces at each end, and made themselves comfortable before nightfall.

The horses were given another large cabin, and as they would not leave the grass and water in the canyon for the barren mountains, they were turned loose, as soon as they had passed a night in their stable and knew where to go for shelter when the storms came.

The deer that had been shot were dressed and hung up, and Gordon Gentry had also killed a couple of wild turkeys, so they were to have a feast that night.

The wood was packed up at the door for ready use, and the limited stores they had were carefully put away in the cupboards outside of the cabin.

"Men, we have coffee enough to last us one meal a day for a month, flour and meal half rations about as long, with bacon, crackers, and a few other things to eke out."

"We must go slow and depend upon game, for there is plenty here."

"Things don't look so bad, for we have warm quarters, our horses are sheltered, and I still have faith that we can find gold here, though others gave it up, and we have picks and shovels to go to work with."

"Don't get blue, but brace up, for things are not so bad, after all—hark! do you hear that?"

Gordon Gentry had spoken cheerily, as though determined to dispel all gloom.

But the sound that had disturbed him was a roar like distant thunder.

All the men rushed to the doors.

Night was at hand, the heavens were inky black, and the horses were rapidly running for shelter to the place they knew was to be their stable.

Their instinct told them what to expect.

A herd of deer went flying up the canyon to the retreats among the little canyons, dense with pines; mountain sheep were now bounding along the cliffs to their retreats, birds were flying affrighted

to their nests, and all showed that the storm was upon them.

"Yes, men, we might now be out in that fearful blizzard, and that would mean an awful death—hark!" again cried Gordon Gentry.

All listened with awe to the roar of the approaching tempest, which was coming from the northward and over the mountains.

They drew their ragged garments closer about them, and looking up at the range suddenly saw vivid flashes of lightning! The thunder burst through the mountains like the discharges of giant guns, and clouds as black as ink came trailing over the skies.

From those inky clouds were hurled a blinding, driving mass of snow, hail, and sleet commingled.

The Gold Hunters, appalled, beheld the blizzard strike the range, and large pines snapped off short, or were torn up and tossed along like straws in its path of mad fury!

Large boulders were loosened and sent rushing, bounding, crashing down the huge hills, some even to be hurled over the mighty cliffs into the canyon.

But down there, where the pine-sheltered cabins were safe, the wildest rush of the storm did not come.

The winds howled savagely, the sleet and snow drove furiously down, and the Gold Hunters were driven, frightened, shivering, anxious, into their snug retreat.

Within, all was brightness from the blazing fires, before one of which a man was busy roasting a wild turkey and haunch of venison, and the delicious odor pervaded the air.

The cabin was built as solid as a rock, and the men in their gladness uttered a wild yell of delight.

All knew that but for that retreat, reached just in time, they would all have ended their lives that night.

To go out into the darkness and storm was death.

Within, all was bright and cheery just then, in spite of rags and scant supplies.

The supper was a feast, and in the bright glare of the fires no haunting spectres were there to disturb them.

Soon they sought their blankets, and only when they awoke and the fires were flickering low, the winds were howling ever so loud, the hail was pattering viciously upon the roof, did grim phantoms of what had been and might be come before them.

One man in his dream gave a cry for mercy, and instantly all were awake, and eager hands threw wood on the fires to dispel the darkness and phantoms of the night.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PONY PETE'S FIND.

Pony Pete dashed away upon his long ride, well equipped for it, but determined that no blizzard should catch him on the way to the fort if good horseflesh could get him there before it came.

He was well mounted, had ample supplies and blankets, and so had only to push ahead.

He passed the turn-off trail to the winter camp that was to be, and kept up his pace, determined to get in the neighborhood of the spot where the Indians had been seen, when night was at hand.

He preferred to go by them, if still there, by night, and he did not forget that they would be sure to have a guard on the watch.

It was dark when he drew near the camp, and dismounting, he went forward on foot.

But no camp fires greeted him, and he knew that the Indians had very nicely gotten away with the end of the storm, to reach their villages in the mountains before caught out again.

Returning for his horse, he rode on to the camp, soon had a fire, unsaddled and staked the animal out, and prepared for a night's rest.

He had no fear of Indians then.

As he sat eating his supper he saw something glimmering in the firelight quite a distance off.

It looked like the glare of a mountain lion's eye, and he drew his rifle round ready for use.

But the glimmer did not move, and at last he arose and approached it.

He found the leather skirt of an old saddle.

But the glittering object was beneath it.

To his surprise he discovered a revolver.

It was a fine weapon, loaded and silver mounted.

The firelight on the silver mounting it was that had caught his eye.

Carrying it back to the fire, he read on the silver plate on the stock:

"Percy Willard's Pard.

"Try me."

"Why, that is the name of that young fellow the chief was telling us about, and who was so dead game.

"He left the camp, that letter said, to follow the chief, but the latter thought they had killed him.

"But this looks as though he might have really left.

"Still, if he did, they drove him off to kill him by having him freeze to death.

"I wonder if this band of Indians did not run upon him? If they did, then they either killed or captured him; from this revolver.

"They left it here, and I guess some brave hid it away and forgot it, or didn't dare come back after it.

"I can only make out that they found the young fellow frozen, or killed, or captured him.

"Well, he's in harder luck if a prisoner than if he was dead, is my opinion expressed to the night air.

"But, I'm glad I found the gun, for it will give the chief another trail to start his thoughts upon."

With this the scout put the revolver away, and then took the precaution to put out the fire wholly and stake his horse well out of the way.

"Those reds left here this morning, and with dead and wounded they will travel slow, so that red will come back after his revolver to-night, if it was hidden away. I'll just take chances and lay for him."

With this Pony Pete spread his blanket under some pines within twenty feet of where lay the old leather saddle skirt. He propped this up just as he had found it, with the revolver under it.

Pony Pete was small of stature, but as limber as a snake, quick as a panther, and strong to a marvelous degree.

He could throw a lasso with a Mexican, and always kept his as close at hand as his revolvers.

The man was simply afraid of nothing, as he had proven to many another's cost.

He dropped to sleep as soon as he drew his blankets over him, but within reach were his lariat and his belt of arms and rifle.

Well he knew that the presence of any one near would awaken him, so he did not have to lose his rest by lying awake to keep watch.

It was midnight when he awoke.

The sound of hoof falls told him the reason.

Instantly he cast off his blanket, got hold of his lasso, and waited.

"I thought he would come," he muttered.

He heard only the hoof strokes of one horse.

"Unshod, so it's an Indian pony," he said.

Nearer and nearer came the pony at a lope.

He was being guided straight to the spot where the scout lay in hiding.

Soon he appeared in sight in the opening.

He looked like a mounted phantom in the darkness.

Straight to the spot he rode, where the saddle skirt lay.

Slipping from his pony the rider bent over to pick up his prize.

He rose with an impatient exclamation, and as he stood there the coil of Pony Pete's lariat settled over his head.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A RED CAPTIVE.

The back of the rider was toward Pony Pete when the lariat was thrown.

It had been thrown with small noose and unerringly, for it settled over the head of the man, was drawn quickly taut about his neck and a sudden pull dragged him backward too rapidly to turn.

Held taut Pony Pete approached as he drew his prisoner by the lariat toward him, and suddenly tripping him, brought him down heavily, at the same time tightening the noose about his neck.

It was an Indian that he had caught, and one not to tamely submit.

He strove to turn upon his foe, tried hard to draw his knife, but a quick turn of the coils of the lasso had pinioned his arms and he struggled in vain.

He breathed like a dying man, gasped loudly and seemed to be choking to death.

"It's hard on him, but I want him alive," said Pony Pete as he struggled to master him.

At last as the Indian grew weaker, the scout began to secure his hands behind his back.

This done, his legs were secured also with the lariat.

Then the noose about his neck was loosened.

It was none too soon, for the Indian was gasping hard.

The scout ran for his canteen, poured water into his mouth, rubbed his neck and chest hard and did all that he could to revive him.

After some time he was successful. Life was coming back from the verge of death, where it had been.

The chest heaved, and bathing his war-painted face, the scout revived him, also forcing water into his mouth.

Then Pony Pete built up the fire near, and resting himself by his prisoner, saw that he was fully restored.

"Hello!" he said in the redskin vernacular.

The Indian was a large man and eyed his little captor curiously.

He made no reply to the scout's greeting.

"Come back for this?" and the scout showed the revolver he had found.

"Yes, mine," said the redskin, in a voice hoarse from his choking, but in fair English.

"Maybe so. We'll see how you can talk, but let me tell you right now, Reddy, I'm your friend if you will let me be, but your foe if you play the bad Injun.

"You are on the warpath, as I see by the painted face, which I disfigured with water, but I want you to talk and with a straight tongue.

"Do you understand?"

"Me hear."

"Well, I am glad you are not deaf."

The Indian looked haggard-faced and an idea seized upon the scout.

He took a flask from his pocket and poured him out a drink of whisky, for without being a drinking man, Pony Pete, as he said, always went prepared for "snake bites."

The Indian appreciated this kindness, for he smiled.

This was proof of the scout's friendship in his mind, in spite of the choking.

Then Pony Pete did more. He got some coffee and a piece of bacon, with a few crackers, and told the Indian to have some supper, releasing his arms for him to do so.

The poor fellow ate ravenously.

Then Pony Pete felt that he was in condition to talk, so said:

"You know who I am."

"Ugh!"

"I am one of Buffalo Bill's men. You call him Pa-e-has-ka."

The redskin nodded.

Talking very slowly, the scout went on:

"Pa-e-has-ka found your great chief, Red Willow, and half a hundred braves, starving and freezing. He gave them his own food and blankets; then he rode to the big gun village of his people, got medicine men, food and blankets and took them to the Red Willow and his young men.

"They are in camp now with my people a sun's trail from here.

"Then Pa-e-has-ka came on with his men to find a band of pale faces who were starving and freezing, as you know, for he gave your band help.

"Pa-e-has-ka has gone on to help those diggers of yellow dirt, and I came back as messenger to the fort."

The Indian nodded.

"I camped here, found this revolver and was sure your band had left this camp this morning, and the brave who hid it would come back for it to-night.

"I waited and you came.

"The revolver belongs to one of the pale faces I speak of, the friend of Pa-e-has-ka.

"He left the camp and was lost. Where is he?"

The Indian shook his head.

"See here, redskin, you tell me what you know and I'll take you right to Red Willow's camp and let you go free to your village with him. But if you don't tell me straight I'll take you to the fort as a prisoner.

"What will you do?"

It was some time before the Indian replied, but Pony Pete was not in a hurry.

Then he said:

"Me talk straight."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE RED BEAVER'S STORY.

Pony Pete seemed to be convinced that the Indian would "talk straight," at least as far as he pleased to do so.

If he believed the story about Red Willow, and knew about Buffalo Bill's treatment of the band who had fired upon him, while he also felt grateful for the scout's treatment of him, he would be inclined to tell enough for Pony Pete to get at the truth.

So the scout said:

"My red brother is wise.

"We will camp together, have a good breakfast, and I will take him to the great Chief Red Willow's camp with me to-morrow."

The Indian nodded, and Pony Pete asked:

"Why is my red brother and his band on the war path?"

The redskin took some time to reply, and then in a quiet way told how there had been trouble in the tribe of the great Chief Red Willow, for Night Bird, a young chief, wished to be the leader of his people, while Running Eagle was his rival and the direct claimant for the leadership.

The Running Eagle was the son of old Red Willow, and was beloved by his people, while Night Bird had a following of wild young bucks, and continually wanted to settle the claim to leadership by a duel between them.

This the Red Willow would not allow, for he did not admit the Night Bird's claim, nor did the others of the tribe save the young chief's few reckless followers.

But Running Eagle one day disappeared, and then the Night Bird said that he would go and find him.

His departure was followed by that of his band, and to this the Indian, Red Beaver, he called himself, belonged.

They had taken the trail of their chief, but had lost it near the camp where he and the scout then were.

Then the blizzard had threatened them, and nearly out of food, they had sought shelter when Buffalo Bill and his men came upon them.

"And you did not find your chief?" asked Pony Pete.

"No find him."

"And your band has gone back to the village?"

"Yes."

"Then old Red Willow must have grown suspicious at the going after his son of the Chief Night Bird, whose band followed soon after, and so have led his young men on the trail."

The Indian nodded assent.

"And even Indian instinct did not prophesy the coming blizzards so soon, so all got caught in them."

Again a nod.

"So far good, but you have not said a word, Red Beaver, about the young pale face whose revolver you came back to get."

"Don't know."

"Just grease your wheels of thought and remember."

"Did you see him?"

"Found him on trail."

"Where?"

The Indian grunted toward the shelter in the canyon.

"How far?"

"One ride."

"That means either between breakfast and dinner, or dinner and supper."

Again a nod.

"Then he could not have been far from the camp he left?"

A shake of the head.

"Was he dead or alive?"

A nod.

"Dead?"

The Indian nodded vigorously.

"Ah! he was dead, frozen, and you got his horse and outfit?"

Red Beaver explained that the chief of the band in search of the Night Bird had gotten the things and claimed them, save the revolver, which had been dropped, and so hidden away, to return for which they had camped on their way to their village, and this was why he had come back, and so had become the scout's prisoner.

"You scalped the man?"

"The young Chief Black Buffalo scalped pale-face brave."

"Where is his body?"

"Coyote."

"No doubt, if you left it on the trail."

"You must take me first to where you left it, and I will bury the bones," said Pony Pete, and he added to himself:

"And satisfy myself if you are lying or not."

"Then I will be able to know as to the young Gold Hunter's fate."

Again turning to the Indian, the scout asked: "Now, I wish to know if your band found the Running Eagle?"

"No."

"Have you been up in this direction?" and the scout pointed toward the timber that sheltered the three graves.

"No. Come this way," and the Indian pointed in the direction they had come to that camp.

"And you found the young pale face brave on that trail?"

"Yes."

"Then he had gone astray from the trail Buffalo Bill took, and in the night cut through a canyon that took him in that direction, thus freezing to death."

"I guess it's a straight story, Red Beaver, and that you were not near where the graves are; but, maybe, I can tell you about your chief, for I knew the Night Bird by sight."

The Indian was at once deeply interested.

"He was a very large brave."

"Yes, big!"

"Had very long hair, down below his waist."

"Yes; hair like a squaw."

"He wore a brass collar around his neck."

A nod.

"Well, he's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, and buried."

"Who kill?"

"I don't know," and the scout told how they had opened the grave of a white man, the chief Buffalo Bill had seen bur-

ied, and found in it the body of the young chief, Night Bird, and whom several of the scouts had recognized.

Red Beaver listened, and at once set Pony Pete down as a liar, so honors were easy between them.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN DOUBT.

Of one thing Pony Pete was assured, and that was the death of the turbulent young chief Night Bird.

But who had killed him?

Who had placed his body in the grave of John Scott, the guide?

That was a mystery.

But Pony Pete came to the conclusion that old Red Willow's band had come across the Indian chief and killed him.

If so, they must have buried his body in the grave of John Scott.

Also they must have dug up the bodies of the two Gold Hunters and scalped them.

But what had they done with the body of the guide?

Could it be that he had been found alive after all?

The scout was puzzled, and made up his mind that he would interview Red Willow.

In the meantime he was anxious to know if the band of Night Bird, under the Black Buffalo, had found Percy Willard dead or alive.

He discovered that to the place where the Red Beaver asserted they had left his body would not take him very far out of his way, so he would go there, making an early start.

This the Red Beaver did not encourage.

But Pony Pete secured his prisoner thoroughly and they turned in for the balance of the night.

The scout dreamed of a severe blizzard, however, so woke up before day, got up, had breakfast ready soon, and the Indian certainly enjoyed his share.

Then the horses were saddled and the start was made.

Pony Pete lost no time, and after three hours' ride they came to the skeleton form of a horse that had been well picked by coyotes, and very recently.

Some of the animals still lingered about the remains in remembrance of the feast.

But there was no human form there.

From the tail and mane of the dead horse Pony Pete recognized that it was the animal Buffalo Bill had taken from the fort with him on his last trail.

It was this horse, Pony Pete knew, that Percy Willard had ridden away from the Gold Hunters' camp.

"Where is the body of the pale face?" asked the scout.

Red Beaver looked as innocent as a heathen Chinese, but made no reply.

"Where is the dead man, Red Beaver?"

The Indian shook his head.

"Why are his bones not here?"

No reply.

"Well, coyotes don't eat bones, and I guess the man was not dead when found, so is a prisoner to your band, or escaped and froze to death."

"You know but will not tell."

"Now for Red Willow's camp."

The scout was angry, for he felt the Indian did know the fate of the young Gold Hunter, but would not tell.

Away they went again, at the same pace, and it was nearing dark when they came in sight of the Indian camp.

It had been well built up by Lieutenant Niles and his soldiers, so that in the second blizzard no one had suffered materially.

One of the surgeons had returned to the fort, but Doctor Powell had remained to care for the wounded Indians, who were doing splendidly.

Lieutenant Niles was in command, and other soldiers had been sent to him with ample supplies.

Colonel Miles was glad to have the camp there, as it was that much nearer Buffalo Bill's operations, should the lat-

ter need aid, and picked men and horses had been sent on this account.

Such was the situation at the camp when Pony Pete rode up with his prisoner.

The scout was greeted with a cheer, and he, Lieutenant Niles and Doctor Powell at once went apart for a talk, for the two officers were most anxious to hear from Buffalo Bill.

Pony Pete told all, as he knew it, and then said:

"Now for a talk with Red Willow and we'll get at the bottom facts, perhaps."

"I see that the Indians here do not look kindly upon my prisoner, and so I told the sentinel to keep him apart from them."

Old Red Willow was sent for.

His kind treatment had softened him somewhat, and when told that Pony Pete had come from Buffalo Bill and had captured Red Beaver on his way, the old chief said:

"The Red Beaver is bad Indian."

"Went with the young chief, Black Buffalo, to find my son and kill him."

"He is with the bad chief, Night Bird, who went off on trail of my son, Running Eagle."

The old chief had told his story, and it coincided with that of the Red Beaver to Pony Pete.

The scout then told what had been told him of the movements of the Black Buffalo's band, of the fight with Buffalo Bill, who later had aided them, and that they had gone back to their village.

He told of the capture of Red Beaver, who had returned for something he had left in camp, he did not state what, and the story the young brave had made known of the Gold Hunter, Percy Willard.

That he had found the dead horse, but not the body of Willard, he told the chief, and then said:

"Now the great chief, Red Willow, will take good care of Buffalo Bill's brother when he goes to his people, if he finds him a prisoner there, for if his body was not there, then he is a prisoner in the hands of the Black Buffalo."

"The Black Buffalo shall give him up."

"If he has killed him, he shall die," was the stern reply of the Red Willow.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE OLD CHIEF'S STORY.

Pony Pete felt assured that Red Willow meant what he said, and so he went on to say:

"The young brave was not fighting the red men, but digging yellow dirt."

"He was going out of the Indian country when Black Buffalo's band found him."

"If they have him a prisoner, they must give him up, and the Red Willow can send the Red Beaver and one of his own young men to his people to tell them what has happened, for his people love the Red Willow and will fear he is dead."

"Now, let me tell the Red Willow that his foe, the young chief, Night Bird, is dead."

The old chief fairly started at this information, stoical as he was.

He looked the scout squarely in the face and asked:

"Did Pa-e-has-ka's brave kill the Night Bird?"

"No, I did not. I only wish I had."

"But I will tell you what I know."

Pony Pete then told the story of the opening of the graves, the finding of John Scott's body gone, and that of the Night Bird in it, and scalped.

Also that the two pale faces were scalped as well.

He described the body of the Indian, and Red Willow said that it was surely the Chief Night Bird.

Surgeon Frank Powell spoke the Indian tongue perfectly, and he did all the interpreting, and understanding the redskins as he did, he said:

"The old chief is deeply moved by what you have told him of the death of that turbulent young chief, though he will not outwardly show his emotion."

"I am sure that he wishes to tell us something of importance."

"But he may not."

The old chief after awhile got Pony Pete to tell the story over again about finding Night Bird's body in the grave, asked where it was, and if put there before the former blizzard.

Then he asked how the dead chief had been wounded, and just when the scalp locks had been taken from the heads of all three.

Pony Pete told him, and Red Willow said that it was done by Indians, and Sioux.

"I am sure he knew nothing about it, for Chief Cody said if he had done it, he had gone right on to where he had found the band freezing," said Pony Pete.

"The old chief knew nothing about it, that is certain."

"But he has something to tell, I am equally certain, only give him time," said Doctor Powell.

Soon the chief asked Pony Pete if any other Indian bodies had been found around where Night Bird's had.

"None."

"No trails, or traces of a fight?"

"None."

"No other Indians were scouting about there?"

"None."

Then Red Willow asked for his pipe to be filled, smoked it deliberately, and out came the whole story of the rivalry between his son, Running Eagle, and the Chief, Night Bird.

He also told how his son had gone out recently, a long way off, to fight the Night Bird, who was to take his trail and follow him.

A young maiden of the village had told this.

As the band of the Night Bird, under Black Buffalo, had followed their chief, the Red Willow had been sure they meant to kill his son, so he had himself taken the Running Eagle's band of young braves, and followed the Black Buffalo's trail, but had lost it, and the blizzard had caught them.

That the old chief told the truth no one doubted.

By questioning him closely, Surgeon Powell found that his belief was that his son had met the Night Bird, had killed him, scalped him, also the other dead, the two Gold Hunters, and—

Then the old chief stopped.

Where was the body of the guide, John Scott?

Where was his son, the Running Eagle?

He knew no more, could surmise no more, save that his son had died in the blizzard or returned to his village.

Surgeon Powell then suggested, as Pony Pete was to set the Indian he had captured free, that the Red Willow call one of his young men, have a talk with both, and send them, well mounted and fitted out, at once to his village, to tell the whole story, and have a party of braves come to meet him, the old chief, and his crippled band, the soldiers escorting them some distance on their way.

If Percy Willard was a prisoner, he was to be given up, brought by the party who came to meet the old chief, and thus could tell him if his son had returned to his people or not.

This plan Lieut. Niles and the Chief Red Willow at once agreed to, and so it was settled.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FAITHFUL MESSENGER.

It was not a pleasant thing for the young Indian Red Beaver to face his irate old chief, after having set out on the trail of his son.

He cowered before the angry glances of the Red Willow, and told the story as he had to Pony Pete.

Of the fate of Percy Willard he pretended to know nothing, but still Pony Pete set him down as lying, and Surgeon Powell remarked:

"He knows more than he will tell, I think; but it may be as he says."

One of the Red Willow's young braves was then selected to go on the mission to the village with the Red Beaver, and they were fitted out well to start before dawn, when Pony Pete would also leave for the fort, but to go in a different direction.

The anxiety of the old chief to know the fate of his son was pitiful, even his stern nature not hiding how deeply his life was wrapped up in the young Chief Running Eagle.

The start was made on time, and Pony Pete pushed hard on his ride to the fort, arriving at noon, and going at once to report to Colonel Miles.

Colonel Miles had been much interested in the varying situations that the setting in of winter more than a month ahead of its usual time had developed.

He also, from a military standpoint, was interested, for he had sent a force of soldiers out to care for Red Willow and his band, and Buffalo Bill and fourteen scouts were off on a relief expedition, so that he could not but feel anxious regarding all, in the face of the bitter blizzards that had already given a foretaste of what the winter threatened to be.

The arrival of Pony Pete was most welcome to him, and the scout was ushered at once into his presence and warmly greeted.

The scout showed the tax upon him of the past few days, and Colonel Miles bade him be seated and said:

"Now, Pony Pete, what is the news from Cody?"

"I have quite a long story to tell, sir, so will begin, with your permission, where we were joined by the chief."

"Do so."

"But I hope all the band are well and in no trouble."

"All are well, sir, but I fear there is trouble ahead for the chief, as he went off alone with Texas Jack on the trail of the men he went to relieve."

"But here is his letter, sir, and I will tell you what I know when you are ready," and having fished out the Chief of Scout's letter from an inner pocket, Pony Pete handed it over to the colonel.

He read it, and his face looked serious, while he said:

"Cody should have returned when he found those fellows had gone off with a passing party of miners."

"But this story he seems to doubt, and he sends the letter left for him by them for me to read."

"They did not go with any party, sir, but just skipped off for reasons the chief is destined to find out, as you will see when you learn my story, colonel."

"All right, Cody knows best, being on the field, and no one has better judgment in spite of his utter disregard of self."

"I will send the supplies he asks for, and the four extra men to return with you."

"Now, to your story, Pony Pete, and then I will see just how matters are, and put the missing links together."

From the time Buffalo Bill had headed the scouts off at the trail until his own return to the fort, Pony Pete told his story.

The colonel listened with marked attention, made notes here and there, and asked an occasional question.

But he had very little to say until the scout finished his story.

Then he said slowly:

"I am convinced that your chief, Pony Pete, knows just what he is doing, though, as usual, he is taking mighty big chances against perishing, he and Texas Jack, for man cannot fight Nature in a tury, and we have already had a couple of samples of what is in store for us this winter."

"Then, too, if Buffalo Bill comes up with those fellows, they, having determined to elude him, and knowing that he has caught them in a deliberate lie, may be in a very ugly mood."

"They are nine to two, and they could readily lay any harm befalling Cody and Omohundro to the weather"

"Yes, sir."

"But then he is cautious, and Texas Jack is a good second; but I do wish Surgeon Powell was with them, too, for they make a remarkable trio."

"Then, too, Surgeon Powell is as remarkable a scout as he is a surgeon, and that is saying a great deal."

"By Jove, I will write and ask him to return with you, leaving it for his judgment what to do after he gets there."

"Then, too, he may be needed for his professional work, too, from the way affairs look."

There was no doubt but that this plan pleased Pony Pete, and he frankly said that Buffalo Bill would be glad of the coming of Surgeon Powell.

Then the colonel stated that he would send a large lot of supplies, sufficient for the winter, should the scout get snowed in, and corn to keep the horses from starving, should it be needed, and he added:

"I am glad you have such a sheltered camp for winter quarters, and Cody evidently wishes to be there to start at the first mark of spring to capture those Gold Hunters, when he has placed them, and not give them a chance to get out of the country, when they are no more nor less than murderers."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RELIEF ON THE TRAIL.

Colonel Miles, having decided that he would not only grant Buffalo Bill's requests for supplies and for men, but have Surgeon Frank Powell go along, too, and also send a most generous lot of supplies, made a note of just what was to be sent, and then asked:

"When do you wish to get off, Pony Pete?"

"I am ready at any time, sir."

"Just like Cody's men, never appearing to tire."

"But I will have all ready for you to start day after to-morrow morning."

"Pardon me, colonel, but we can't depend on the weather, and if the commissary and quartermaster can work to-night, we can start at dawn and then be sure of a day ahead, in case another blizzard is brewing, and I wish to make my first night's halt at the Red Willow camp."

"Ah, yes; and the men whom I send there as an additional force can accompany you that far."

"I shall see that Surgeon Powell is also well supplied, though I shall not order him to go, merely suggest it, for this is out of his duty."

"Yes, sir, but nothing could keep him back, for he loves it too well."

"All of you plainsmen become infatuated with the wild and perilous life you lead."

"Can you blame us, sir?" asked Pony Pete, with enthusiasm.

"No, I cannot, for I know how it is with a soldier's life, for it fascinates me."

"But now let me compliment you upon your very clever capture of that red-skin."

"It was a complete surprise, sir, so I had all the advantage."

"You modestly put it that way; but you got at the true inwardness of what old Red Willow was out with a small band for; but just what this changing bodies in the grave means I do not know, for you say neither the old chief's party nor the band Cody met and fought had been near when the men were buried."

"No, sir, they had not."

"Then that is one of the mysteries to be solved—the disappearance of the body of the guide of the Gold Hunters, and also the fate of that young man Willard."

"Yes, sir; but the chief will unearth it all."

"I believe that he will."

"But you will know by the time you get back to the Red Willow camp if the young chief Running Eagle has returned to his people or is still missing, so you can carry that news to your chief."

"Yes, sir."

"I expect Lieutenant Niles will have

turned the wounded Indians over to the party coming for them from their village, and then his force can return to the fort, though I would rather he should go on to your winter camp and be a support to Cody of more men, should he need them."

"The Gold Hunters are but nine, sir."

"True, but the Indians are more, and the discontents now led by Black Buffalo might swoop down upon Cody's camp in between blizzards."

"I had not thought of that, sir."

"Upon second thought, I shall send Niles orders to camp where he is for the winter, and send him a gun and men enough to bring his force up to fifty men, so you can report this to Buffalo Bill, and he will know that he can retreat upon this camp, if he has to, or send word there for aid."

"Yes, sir."

"Now go and turn in, and get what rest you can, and all will be ready for a start at dawn."

Pony Pete at once went to his quarters, while the colonel sent an orderly for his adjutant, and also for the quartermaster and commissary officers of the fort.

The three officers were quickly on hand, and orders were given for the supplies and all else needed for the winter camp of the scouts far away in the mountains.

Orders were also given for a piece of artillery, more men, and supplies to be sent to the Red Willow camp, sixty miles distant, and to follow Pony Pete's relief party as soon as possible.

This done, Colonel Miles devoted himself to letter writing, first addressing one to Lieutenant Niles, with full instructions to fortify himself where he was by building a stockade fort and corral and prepare to spend the winter there, being ever ready to march at once to the aid of Buffalo Bill upon call.

Another letter was written to Surgeon Frank Powell, asking him, if so he wished, to go with Pony Pete to the winter camp of Buffalo Bill, to render what advice and aid in his power when necessary.

The third letter was to Buffalo Bill, telling him that a United States detective should at once be sent to the village in Missouri, where the Gold Hunters hailed from, according to the letter found in the pocket of Lucas Shelton, and written by Belle Lester.

The detective should have orders to get at the bottom facts of each man of the party, and send full particulars to him, Colonel Miles, with all dispatch.

Buffalo Bill was also told in the letter to "make haste slowly," to take no great risks, and when he located the Gold Hunters, to wait until the first breaking of spring before moving upon them.

These letters finished, Colonel Miles left them in charge of the sentinel at headquarters, to be given to Pony Pete when he called for them, and then retired for the night.

When he awoke he was told that Pony Pete and his party of four scouts, with a score of pack horses well laden, had left the fort hours before, while the relief for the Red Willow camp was just filing out of the stockade.

"It is dangerous work, in the face of what will be a terrible winter, but Buffalo Bill is not a man to fall, once he starts to see the end of a trail," said Colonel Miles to his adjutant, who was breakfasting with him.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TWO TRAILERS.

With his faithful comrade, Texas Jack, Buffalo Bill pushed ahead upon the trail of the Gold Hunters.

The last blizzard had wiped out all traces of the tracks, save in places, yet to two such experienced plainsmen as were the scouts, they could pick out the way the Gold Hunters had taken without much difficulty.

They knew by the "lay of the land" just how they would go, and when they

took their own judgment they were rewarded, sooner or later, by discovering tracks—a camp, or other proof of their being right.

The weather was again beginning to threaten a storm, but the scouts were too well prepared to fear freezing to death, could they reach any shelter.

So on they pushed, until one afternoon they came upon the canyon in which was the deserted mining camp.

"They must be in this settlement, Jack."

"Sure."

"We will hide our horses and take to the cliffs to reconnoiter."

"That will be best."

So the horses were ridden far off the trail they had been traveling, and around so as to reach the tops of the cliffs on the right of the canyon.

Suddenly the two scouts halted.

A small cabin was before them.

It was nestled away in a thicket of pines, and right under a massive cliff, while on either side it was protected by overhanging hills.

"I say, Jack."

"Yes."

"If we could only take up quarters with the one who lives there."

"Maybe we can."

"We must go slow."

"We will."

"But isn't it a spot to go through a blizzard in, for look at the grass there, and then wood is right at hand and this stream flows out of the cliff."

"We'll see whose house it is."

They dismounted and began to reconnoiter.

"Jack."

"Yes."

"The gent is not at home."

"How do you guess it?"

"There is no smoke out of the chimney."

"You are right."

"Off at work in his mine, I guess."

"Yes."

They went forward, but no one was visible.

The door was closed, but no lock was on it.

The cabin was small, but at one end was a shed just its size, evidently a kitchen.

Wood was piled up near, but every indication was there to show that no human being had lived there for many a month.

"Deserted."

"Yes, Bill."

"The very place for us."

"It is, indeed."

"That shed will make a good stable, and we can fence across the end of the canyon, and so turn our cattle loose."

"Yes, and nobody is likely to come here, for round to the settlement the way we came is a dozen miles."

"All of it."

"We are in luck."

"You bet we are."

"We'll camp right here."

"We will."

"They won't see any smoke over in the settlement."

"No, they can't, with the high cliffs that close them in; but we have flanked them, and a climb of a thousand feet will enable us to look down upon the settlement."

"Yes."

The two scouts then brought their horses up the little canyon, staked them out, cleaned the cabin out thoroughly, built a fire in the hearth, put pine straw in the shed, which was to be the stable for their four horses, and then made themselves comfortable, congratulating themselves upon their "striking it rich," as Texas Jack said.

They found old, worn-out picks and shovels there, showing that the former dweller there had worked the earth hard for the yellow metal.

The cabin had a couple of bunks in it, a table, and a couple of rustic chairs, with canvas backs and seats.

When the scouts had unpacked their

stores and the fire was burning cheerily, all looked very comfortable indeed.

Their next work was to take their hatchets, cut down saplings, and fence across the hundred feet that the canyon was wide, and this was a complete barrier to the escape of their horses.

This done, with night at hand, they turned their attention to supper, and after enjoying a hearty meal, lighted their pipes and discussed their success thus far.

"To-morrow will show us what we are to do, Jack."

"Yes."

"I have once been by this settlement, two years ago, and there was a hot lot of miners here then, tough as they make them, and they were getting very little gold, so were in ugly humor."

"But, it seems to me, that since then I have heard the camp was deserted."

"Yes, and, if so, our men are not there."

No, unless they have halted until the next storm blows over, for it's a mighty long pull beyond here to the nearest settlement.

"But to-morrow will tell."

CHAPTER XL.

TRACKED.

The morning broke with the skies overcast with a dull gray haze.

"Falling weather within twenty-four hours, Jack," said Buffalo Bill, as he looked out of the door.

"Yes, but we are comfortable."

"Here, yes."

"But we must find out if our party has pushed on, for I am on their trail to stay."

"We can find out soon."

"If they are in the big canyon where the settlement is, I shall be glad, for I'd like to hang up here until we know just what their game is."

The horses had improved their time nicely, and greatly enjoyed the generous feast they had had in such a sheltered spot.

After breakfast the two scouts started out on foot to reconnoitre.

They had a hard climb of a mile up the mountain, but at least reached the summit of the range.

They found that they were right in their idea that they had struck the rear of the cliffs that overhung the valley where the settlement was.

The cliffs were there, bright and overhanging the canyon in a wall of rock.

Not far from the spot they had reached the stream went tumbling over the high precipice and dashing down into a basin at the head of the canyon, flowing thence in a swift stream down the valley.

From their position the scouts took in the whole basin, a couple of miles in length.

But the settlement was at the upper end and they could almost throw a stone upon the nearest cabin.

Of cabins hidden away in the timber, they counted twoscore, some large, some small.

They could readily pick out the one that had been the "Headquarters of Deviltry," as Texas Jack expressed it.

"Jack."

"Yes."

"That camp is a deserted one."

"It looks it."

"You see those houses?"

"There are about two dozen of them."

"I see."

"They belong to the men we are following."

"Good."

"They are here, yes, and they are all the human beings who are here."

"You think so?"

"Do you see any smoke coming out of any chimney but one of all those cabins?"

"No, you are right," and Texas Jack ran his field glass all over the canyon.

"Now, we saw the wagon track yesterday, so know the Gold Hunters came this way; in fact, they may have come from this very camp."

"That's so."

"But after their murderous acts, to escape punishment, have come this way to remain until the winter was over and then break for an escape through this other way."

"Right you are."

"Now, they have nothing to do, so sleep late, and—ah! They are coming out now."

A man came out of the cabin as Buffalo Bill spoke and looked about him, especially at the overcast skies.

"Jack."

"Yes, Bill."

Buffalo Bill had his field glass leveled upon the man a quarter of a mile away in the canyon and said:

"We have found our men."

"You recognize him?"

"Yes."

"He is the leader of the gang, the Head Trump, and he is named Gordon Gentry."

"See, others are coming out."

"Yes."

Other Gold Hunters now came out of the cabin, and the two scouts kept their glasses upon them.

Buffalo Bill, in half an hour's time had recognized each one of the men and counted the nine who composed the party.

"They look as though they had come to stay, Bill."

"That proves it, for they were at breakfast when we got up here, and see there are half a dozen going to their claims, for what else can take them among those rocks."

"That is it, they are working for gold, and yonder are two going off on a hunt," and Texas Jack pointed to a couple of the Gold Hunters walking down the canyon with their rifles and leading a horse, as though to bring back their game.

"They seem to be in no dread of pursuit, Bill, for no watch is kept."

"No, Jack, they think they fooled me, and don't suspect any man in his senses would follow them in the face of such weather as we have had."

"They think they are all right, and maybe they are, only I doubt it, for we must begin work."

"I am ready."

"That storm will break to-night, and I wish you to be the one to act, for they know me."

"Say what you want."

"I wish you to mount your horse, strike their camp this afternoon, and claim to be a scout carrying dispatches, for we can fix up the paper."

"You may have to stay there until the blizzard is over, but you can find out the better all we wish to know about those fellows."

"I'll do it."

"You know, Jack, that you take your life in your hands in going there, for they may wish to kill you; but you may be sure I will be on hand to protect you as far as I can, and if they harm you then you may rest assured that you will be well avenged."

"I am pretty sure of that, Pard Bill; but I'll take all risks, and they will believe my story, I guess; at least we'll try it, sir."

After having thoroughly reconnoitred the rocks Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack returned to their lone cabin to prepare for the going of the latter into the lion's den, as he laughingly spoke of his bold venture.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE LONE VIGIL.

Texas Jack's alleged "dispatches" were made up from official envelopes Buffalo Bill carried in his saddle bags.

The scout was thoroughly equipped then with a heavy roll of blankets, a couple of rubber blankets and a good supply of provisions.

He was told by Buffalo Bill not to speak of Fort Shelter, but to be traveling from Fort Utah to Military Post Number Five, as this trail would not take him

within two hundred miles of Colonel Miles' command.

Thus posted and equipped, Texas Jack started upon his mission, while Buffalo Bill started, by a nearer way they had discovered upon their return, to the cliffs, to note his entrance among the Gold Hunters.

On his way up Buffalo Bill did all he could to make his climb more direct and easier, and arriving upon the cliff, his first duty was to build a little wicky-up to shelter him from the cold, as he lay upon the watch of those in the canyon.

Getting a position behind a scrub pine and rock, with stones and brush he soon had a snug little shelter, filled with pine straw.

He furthermore noticed one point below him several hundred feet which he could reach without difficulty, and there grew a stout cedar.

From there to the canyon below he measured as about a hundred feet, and muttered:

"Two good lariats tied together and fastened to that tree will let me down into that canyon in five minutes' time from here."

"Fortunately, I have two lariats with me, so they are right in place."

The wicky-up completed, and filled with pine straw for warmth, the scout took up his position, his blankets wrapped about him, for it was biting cold up there, and then made the lariats fast together, in case of need.

He knew well that he must get back to his cabin by night, or perish with cold, for well he understood that a blizzard was threatening to break as darkness fell, or certainly during the night.

He also felt certain that Texas Jack must get into the cabin of the Gold Hunters by night, or he, too, would perish, unless he returned to their little shelter, which he did not expect him to do, for his comrade was no man to back down in the face of difficulties or danger.

Jack had almost a dozen miles to ride, he knew, from where he had parted with him, but this could be gone over within a couple of hours.

In that time he ought to ride up into the canyon.

The plan of the Texan had been to keep right on around the mouth of the canyon, and go right up to the settlement, claiming he was seeking shelter from the coming storm.

Each moment did Buffalo Bill expect to see Texas Jack ride up the canyon, to the one occupied cabin.

But the afternoon wore on, and he did not appear.

Could some accident have befallen him? Then Buffalo Bill recalled the two hunters who had gone forth on their search for game in the morning.

They had not returned yet.

Could his comrade have met them? The scout hoped that if he had met them the meeting had not been a hostile one, for that would have spoiled his plans to get what information he could about the future movements of the Gold Hunters.

He had not seen the men return to the cabin, and in some way he connected Jack's non-appearance with them.

"Well, if he does not appear before I am forced to leave, it will take a mighty severe storm to prevent my going down the lariats into that canyon to-morrow," he said, in his determined way.

Still waiting and watching, Buffalo Bill saw the men who had gone out in the morning begin to return.

They were alarmed by the darkening of the skies and the rising wind, for they knew well what was coming.

Counting the men, he saw them all pass under the cliff that he had seen go out in the morning to hunt for gold.

But Texas Jack did not appear.

Darkness was gathering, but until the shadows in the canyon were so deep that he could not see down there, he remained at his post, waiting for the friend that came not.

At last he was compelled, for self-preservation, to hasten down to the cabin, and he had barely reached the door when the blizzard came sweeping over the mountain tops, and the three horses went galloping to their shelter, and were closed within by the scout, to better shelter them from a night that he well understood would freeze them if exposed.

But the shed was compactly built, there was pine straw knee deep for them to lie in, and Buffalo Bill buckled their blankets upon them.

Then he threw wood upon the cabin fire and prepared his supper, after which, with his pipe to comfort him, he sat down to think what the fate of his companion might have been.

And as he sat there the winds howled savagely in the pines, and fairly shook the cabin, as the gusts swept down upon it, while the cold was intense without.

"An awful night and an awful storm."

"Poor Jack! May Heaven help him if he was caught out in this blizzard," said the scout, fervently.

CHAPTER XLII.

A SURPRISE.

When he left his comrade to go upon his perilous errand, Texas Jack rode along in a way that showed utter indifference to what was before him.

He saw that the clouds were gathering, and he had experienced all the fury of a mountain blizzard in that country more than once.

But he knew that a dozen miles' ride would give him the shelter of the Gold Hunters' cabin, and what he had to pass through there would not worry him until the time came.

After he had gone some distance the thought occurred to him to make a flank movement, and approach the canyon from the other direction, rather than simply ride up to it and turn in.

His dispatches were dated at Post Number Five, and if they suspected him it would be well, should they go to see, that the Gold Hunters would find his trail coming from the northward.

This cost him a ride around of half a dozen miles further on, but he considered that it was worth the extra distance and time.

At last he gained the trail, and some miles from the canyon, but he had to go further around than he had anticipated.

The storm was gathering blacker and blacker, for snow clouds are always the blackest, and he felt that he could congratulate himself when he got within reach of shelter.

The afternoon was well spent, and he hurried his horse along, for he felt, too, that Buffalo Bill would wonder at his delay, and he was growing anxious, for he knew that he had returned to the cliff to watch his entrance of the canyon.

The trail he traveled was an old one, and had once been well traveled, but he saw no trace of aught save game having gone over it for a long while.

Suddenly he heard a rifle shot close ahead of him, then another and a herd of deer dashed out into the trail ahead of him.

Instantly his repeating rifle was thrown up to his shoulder, and one, two shots rang out.

Each one brought down a deer.

Then he called out:

"Ho, pards, I've got your game for you."

"Come this way out into the trail."

He did not doubt but that they were the two hunters of the morning they had seen leave the canyon.

The herd had been in sight when he heard the shots, but he had seen no deer fall, though one appeared to have been hit, and this one Texas Jack had brought down first.

From some distance off a voice answered:

"Is that you, Braxton?"

"My name is not Braxton."

"Who are you then, for I don't know your voice?"

"Come here and I'll introduce myself."

"All right; but did you get a deer?"

"I got two fine ones."

"We missed."

"No, one of you wounded a stag."

"They are both here where I am."

The men were coming through the thicket a couple of hundred yards away as one of them talked and soon came out within full view of the scout.

He knew that they suspected he was one of their party, and he held himself ready for a surprise when they discovered their mistake.

He did not know but that they would show fight, and he was not to be caught napping.

He had slashed the throats of his game to let them bleed, and stood by his horse, with a large tree on one side, a boulder on the other for protection, should he have to hunt cover.

He heard the men coming through the thicket and knew that they had a horse with them.

They were talking as they came, and wondering which of the Gold Hunters he was, if not Buck Braxton, whose voice they thought they had recognized.

A moment more and the bushes were thrust aside and two men appeared.

One of them was leading a horse.

The men halted in amazement at the sight of a stranger.

"Who are you," was asked, and each man held his rifle ready for use.

"My name is John Omohundro," was the reply.

"What are you doing here?"

"Carrying dispatches."

"Where from?"

"Fort Number Five."

"Where going?"

"To Fort Strong."

"Are you a soldier?"

"No, a military messenger; but why, pard, you don't seem to be very hospitable, and I supposed I'd find a mining camp somewheres about here and get a welcome, for I don't like the weather just now."

"Come, now, I've told you who I am, I've earned a supper and lodging by killing you two fine deer, so tell me, now, who and what you are?" and the scout's manner was frank and cheery.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A DARING VENTURE.

The two men were in rags, as Texas Jack saw at a glance.

They were wan-faced and they looked at him with an expression of deep suspicion.

But his words and manner seemed to reassure them, and one of them came forward, still on his guard, however, leaving the other to follow with the horse.

"We are miners," he said.

"I guessed that from your risking your lives up here in the Indian country."

"We had found our pile and started for home, but we got robbed, so had to come back here for the winter and starve it through, for the camp a few miles from here is deserted, save by us, as it didn't pay."

"I had heard that it did not pay much, but supposed some one would be here."

"Only our party."

"Are there many of you?"

"Only nine."

"And you got robbed?"

"Yes, of gold, provisions and clothing."

"Too bad."

"And you had to come here?"

"It was the only place we knew of, and it was here or freeze and starve together."

"Who robbed you?"

"A gang of scouts from Fort Shelter, for we knew some of them, but they claimed to be regular road-agents."

"Then they would suffer for it if you reported it."

"We did, for we met their chief, Buffalo Bill, and told him."

"What did he say?"

"He only laughed at us; but I guess he had his shares of the plunder, too."

"I thought he was chief of scouts and an honest man, for he is so considered down my way."

"He's no good, and don't deserve the name he has won."

"Why, we know he put his men upon our track to rob us."

"I shall report this to the proper person to hear it," said Texas Jack, indignantly, and then he said:

"I suppose you can give me shelter until this blizzard coming up blows itself out?"

"Oh, yes; come with us to the camp, as soon as we pack those deer upon our horse."

"I see you have gotten some turkeys and a fine string of fish," and Texas Jack pointed to several wild turkeys and a fine string of brook trout and perch hanging across the pack horse.

"Yes, and with the deer we'll be fixed for game for several days."

The deer were soon across the pack horse, and the trail was followed for a mile, when Texas Jack again threw his rifle to his shoulder and brought down a fine mountain sheep from a cliff.

"You are a dead shot," cried one of the men in admiration.

"Was trained not to miss what I aimed at," was the modest reply.

The mountain sheep was a young one and quite large.

It was thrown over the pack horse, and the pace was hastened for the canyon, for darkness was coming on, and the storm was threatening to break at any minute.

The night came on as they turned into the valley, and the Gold Hunters' horses had already hastened to take refuge in their stable.

As they reached the cabin it was night and the storm was upon them.

The game was quickly thrown off, the pack horse and the animal ridden by Texas Jack were rushed for the stable by one of the men, while the other called out to those in the cabin to open the door and get the game dressed and hung up.

The cabin door swung open and Gordon Gentry called out:

"We began to fear for you, boys, but thank Heaven you are safe."

"But who the deuce is that?"

"A gent we met on the trail, and who brought down two fine deer and a mountain sheep for us."

"He's carrying dispatches to Fort Strong."

"Fort what?" asked Gentry, and all the men were now gazing at Texas Jack, who stepped into the cabin.

"Fort Strong, sir."

"I am bearing dispatches from Post Five to Fort Strong, and, thank Heaven, I've found shelter and good company in such a storm," said the scout, pleasantly.

Gentry did not like the coming of a guest, especially a military one.

But he welcomed the scout, and the sight of the fish, venison, and turkeys gladdened his heart, while Texas Jack said:

"I don't know how you are off for provisions, pard, but I have plenty, bacon, flour, coffee, and all else, for I expected I'd get snowed in, so came well prepared for it."

This was good news for the Gold Hunters, and in honor of their stranger guest they decided to have a supper of full rations all around.

The cooks at once set to work, and the guest was given a seat and plied with all manner of questions by Gordon Gentry, who had been taken apart by the men who brought the scout in and told just what they had said to him about their being there.

Gentry told the same story of hard luck, their being robbed by Buffalo Bill's scouts from Fort Shelter, and having to return to where they were to save their

lives, and added that they were on short rations, save for game.

And to all Texas Jack listened most attentively, drawing his own conclusions, however, of the Gold Hunters.

CHAPTER XLIV.

BUFFALO BILL ON GUARD.

Texas Jack's story was believed by the Gold Hunters.

They had no reason to doubt it.

It seemed all right that a military courier should be carrying dispatches from post to post.

He was asked many questions as to the country he had come through, and the settlements, or mining camps, through which he had passed.

The scout knew enough of the country to reply intelligently, and he made the nearest mining camp as far away as he dared, for he wished to keep the Gold Hunters just where they were.

Then Buffalo Bill came in for a lot of abuse from one and all, and Texas Jack saw that it was the desire of the Gold Hunters to try and blacken the fair fame of the great scout.

Supper was at last announced, and Texas Jack remembered that he had a flask of whisky, just enough for a drink all around, to give an appetite.

This proposal won the hearts of the band, and the drinks were equalized by Gentry to a nicety.

Then they sat down to roast turkey, venison steaks, fried fish, hot hoeecake, potatoes, and coffee.

It was a feast for men who were living on half rations.

The scout had some tobacco, plenty to give all a little, and pipes were brought out that had long been unused.

The storm without continued to rage with unabated violence, and Texas Jack congratulated himself mentally, and thought of his pard Buffalo Bill in his lonely cabin, and his anxiety about him.

He knew that he would be anxious, not only on account of his not seeing him enter the canyon before dark, but also owing to the great peril he might be exposed to in going among men who were next to desperate.

"I will be sure to show myself to be all right to-morrow, if Bill can get upon that cliff to see me," he said to himself.

The howling of the winds, and increasing cold, with the driving of the sleet against the cabin, added to the drink, generous supper, and pipe to top off with, made everybody anxious to turn in.

As there was no extra bunk, Texas Jack said he would spread his blankets before one of the fires, the one not used for cooking, and would be wholly comfortable there.

The men enviously watched him as they saw him unroll fine Navahoe blankets, and make himself comfortable on half a dozen of them, while a warm bearskin served as a mattress.

"Your horse has a heavy load to carry," said Gentry.

"You carry so many provisions, too."

"Yes, I started with a pack horse, but left him on the trail."

"I would not give up my outfit, though, having no idea of starving or freezing, if caught in a blizzard that might detain me several weeks."

"And you have supplies to last you so long?" eagerly asked Gentry.

"Oh, yes, fully a month, if not wasted."

"And you have blankets enough for a dozen men."

"I don't wish to freeze."

"How long will it take you to go to Fort Strong from here?"

"If the weather is good three days."

No more was said, and the men began to drop off to sleep, and Texas Jack was not long in following their example.

It was broad daylight when he awoke, and the fires had burned low in each fireplace.

But the storm still raged, and he got

up and threw wood on, and soon had a cheery blaze that added warmth to the cabin.

The cooks got up and began to get breakfast, and folding his storm coat about him, the scout went out to take a look at his horse.

He found the animals all right, and he opened the door for them to take a run to the brook, and get what grass they could not covered up by snow and ice.

He looked up now and then to the cliff, and suddenly stopped short on his way back to the cabin.

There, in spite of the driving storm and bitterly cold weather, he beheld his friend.

Buffalo Bill had climbed that steep, in the face of death, to see if he could catch a glimpse of his pard.

Instantly Texas Jack took off his broad sombrero and waved it.

His signal was seen and answered.

His brave pard knew that he was all right, and the continuing of the blizzard told him that he could not leave there that day.

Returning to the cabin the Texan found the men getting up, and told them he had been out to look at his horse and the weather.

Breakfast was soon ready, and then it was a long dismal day that was to follow.

But Texas Jack determined to question the men all he dared and make what discoveries he could about them.

Having seen Buffalo Bill on guard, he felt satisfied that all was going well.

CHAPTER XLV.

SPEEDING THE PARTING GUEST.

The day wore its dreary length along.

The men seemed inclined to feast upon their guest's supplies, and he appeared not unwilling, but produced no more whisky for "appetizers."

Texas Jack had gotten Gentry into conversation several times, and in an ingenious way had asked him many questions as to how they had come to the mines, from what part of the country they had come, if luck had been very good, and where they had been working for the precious metal.

Gentry had told them of their coming a year and a half before, but did not say where from, nor where they had "struck it rich."

He admitted that they had been most fortunate, and then came in the story of their having been robbed of gold and supplies.

He said more that they were going to stick it out there, as they were finding a little, very little, gold, and seek other quarters, better paying, in the spring.

Furthermore, Gentry went on to say that in their hard luck they had been put on half rations, and poor food at that, save for the game they got and fish.

That, by his conversation, he, Omohundro, had a month's supplies for one man, and on short rations that would care for nine men two weeks.

Self-preservation was the first law of nature, and they must look out for themselves, so, as he could ride to Fort Strong in three days, they would allow him four days' rations, and they take the balance, along with all his blankets save two and his bearskin.

They would bid him godspeed, and, as the weather promised to be fine, he could start the next morning for Fort Strong, and the knowledge that he was short of provisions would not allow him to tarry.

Also, Gordon Gentry wished to add, that he must not think hard of them, for, as he had stated he expected to come back by their camp on his return, in six weeks or a couple of months, if he could possibly travel, they would pay him well in uncoined gold for all the supplies he could bring them upon two or more pack horses, and they wanted clothing, boots, and hats from the fort sutler, also.

They promised to give him double the price of all if he would do this for them. Would he do it?

Texas Jack had not been surprised at the determination to rob him.

It was just what Buffalo Bill had said they would do, and he had hoped they would, so they would still remain where they were.

The scout said that he could but submit, and as they were in really hard luck, he would bring the supplies they asked for, and upon the terms offered.

Should he be unable to return, then he would send them by another courier, and return at the earliest day possible, as he well understood their necessities.

Thus was the matter settled, and the scout showed up what he had in the way of supplies and covering.

All were taken, save four days' rations, the bear robe, and two blankets, and the men said this was ample for him, as the weather would be fine.

It had cleared off in the early afternoon, and was growing warmer.

The scout noticed that the Gold Hunters were no longer so generous with the supplies, now that they had to depend upon them; but he said nothing and turned in early for a good night's rest.

It was well that the weather was less cold, for he felt the change to his lesser covering greatly.

"I can stand it, and they'll be warm enough some day," he muttered significantly.

He was up before dawn, but the men would not turn out, calling out to him good-by.

As the cook did not get up either, he had to get his own breakfast, and out of his own limited supply, he found out.

Then he went after his horse, and saddling him hastily, mounted and rode off.

It was just dawn, and, though the weather had greatly moderated, and the storm was over, it was still biting cold.

He smiled grimly, however, as he rode away, and muttered, as he turned into the trail:

"Well, that is what those devils call speeding the parting guest.

"So be it; I will return some day.

"Now, to keep on this trail a dozen miles, in case they should track me, and then I can flank around and reach the cabin."

Four hours after he had flanked around and ridden up to the cabin.

He called as he got out of his saddle.

But no answer came to his call.

Buffalo Bill was not there, though the three horses were in the little stable, which had not been opened, and there was no fire on the hearth to welcome him.

What had become of Buffalo Bill?

CHAPTER XLVI.

A SPY IN THE CAMP.

Buffalo Bill passed the night with his mind set upon one purpose.

He was perfectly comfortable in the cabin, knew that the horses were also, and the fire burned brightly, casting a genial warmth through the cabin, that made the contrast without, of howling, icy winds, driving sleet, and snow.

But not having seen Texas Jack enter the canyon worried him.

Being known to the Gold Hunters, he had not dared to go, though he had thought of doing so in disguise, by sacrificing his long hair, moustache, and imperial.

He well knew, if recognized, having fled to avoid him, the Gold Hunters would not hesitate at any act to prevent being taken back with him, and so he had allowed Texas Jack to go.

He believed that his comrade would be in no great danger, if he managed right, and he had every confidence in him that he would do so, for he had been often tried and found not wanting.

Going to sleep with a fixed determination upon his mind, Buffalo Bill awoke before day, arose, built up the fire, and had breakfast.

The storm was still raging, but that did not deter him from his fixed intention.

He put on his heavy storm coat, tied his sombrero down over his ears, carried a box of matches and bundle of dry sticks along to build a fire quickly, if he had need to do so, and with his rifle slung at his back, his lariats around him, and a stout stick grasped in his heavily gloved hands, he boldly stepped out into the biting storm.

He had made a good fire before leaving, to warm him upon his return, and put the coffee pot near, to quickly boil and give him a hot drink at short notice.

It was just at the dawn of day, and he shrunk back at the first rude, biting blast that he met.

But on he went, and after an hour of the hardest work of his life, he had climbed the half mile to the cliff.

His shelter was there, and he got into it very quickly and rested.

Then he began to look down into the valley.

The cabins were visible now, and as he gazed he saw a well-muffled form come out of one and make his way to another.

In the driving sleet he could not see very well, but at last, after a long look through his glass, he said, most emphatically:

"By Heaven! but it is Texas Jack!

"He got there after all."

He saw the man go into the cabin where the horses were, then come out, stand, and seem to be looking around at the cliff.

Instantly he arose and showed himself, and the silent waving of their sombreros was the salute between them.

Texas Jack went back into the cabin, seemingly glad to escape the icy hurricane, and Buffalo Bill, leaving his lariats in his retreat, at once started upon his return to the cabin.

"Nothing will be done to-day that I can see, if this storm keeps up," said Buffalo Bill, and he made his way down the steep trail to the cabin.

When he was safely within its shelter he realized fully the great risk he had taken, and how cold he was.

"I'd have frozen in another hour, if I had not built a fire," he said.

But hot coffee and the warmth of the cabin soon brought him round all right.

Seeing later that it was going to clear off, that it was growing warmer, too, as the winds lulled, he got out several lariats and began to make a unique rope ladder.

He completed this, and with a roll of blankets, his bundle of firewood, and his coffee pot and canteen of water, along with something to eat, he started out again for the cliff.

He had allowed the horses to leave their stable and get some water and a couple of hours of grazing, but now drove them in once more and closed the door.

Up the steep trail he again made his way, and once more reached his retreat.

He saw that the sun was shining brightly now, the horses of the Gold Hunters were out feeding, Texas Jack's among them, and now and then he saw one of the men appear, but soon retreat to the cabin, under the biting cold.

Wrapped in his blankets in the sheltered retreat, he was not uncomfortable at least, and so passed the hours of the afternoon.

As night came on he arose, built a fire back among the rocks, where its reflection could not be seen, had his hot coffee and supper, and then putting on more wood, he went back to the retreat, got his lasso ladder and other lariats, and began the climb down the cliff to the single pine tree referred to before.

Reaching it, he dropped a lariat, with a stone tied to the end, over the cliff, thus obtaining the distance.

This he measured with his rope ladder, and was glad to find that it would reach from the edge of the cliff down into the canyon bottom.

A lasso bound around the tree and attached to the ladder made up the rest of the distance, and without hesitation,

with his rifle slung at his back, Buffalo Bill swung himself over the edge and was hanging in midair.

Down the lasso ladder he went, and reached the bottom of the canyon without mishap.

After locating the spot thoroughly in his mind, he walked slowly toward the cabin of the Gold Hunters.

He saw streaks of light along the edge of the roof, and as he drew near he heard voices in no low tones.

Among them he heard the voice of Texas Jack, who little dreamed that his faithful comrade was almost within reach of his arm, and little did the Gold Hunters think there was a spy in their camp as well as in their cabin.

CHAPTER XLVII.

SEPARATE WAYS.

Buffalo Bill heard every word uttered in the cabin.

He heard the clever robbery of Texas Jack, of his supplies, and, in fact, listened to enough to convince him that the Gold Hunters had had no other food than what he had left with them when he started to the fort, and their own meagre supply.

With what Texas Jack would leave by force of circumstances, they could eke out another month, perhaps longer, as they at least could get game in quantities.

"They shall have supplies," he muttered.

"And they will remain here, for I'll see to that.

"I dare not attempt to bring my men here in a body, or take them back in this kind of weather, and it is good for the whole winter, I think, and an early breaking up in the spring.

"I am content, or will be, when I have had a talk with Jack."

With this he turned away from the cabin.

He at once realized how cold he had become, and he fairly hobbled to the cabin where the horses were.

He well knew how to get warm.

In the cabin it was really comfortable from the animal heat, and the horses were all crowded together.

Mounting one, he pressed his feet against the warm hides of others on each side, and put his benumbed hands under the heavy mane of the animal he was on.

It took him a long time to get thawed out, but it was slow but sure, and he felt as warm as possible after his very clever method of keeping himself from freezing.

Wrapping his great coat closely about him, he went out of the cabin to once more face the icy air.

Back to the cliff he went, up the ladder, which he drew up after him, and then to the little fire back in the rocks.

This was built up without any dread of discovery, and hot coffee and supper were prepared.

He dared not attempt the descent in the darkness, to return to his cabin, so spread his blankets in the little retreat, got thoroughly warmed, and turned in a couple of hours after midnight.

Tired as he was, he did not wake up until after dawn, and was then very cold.

He did not see any one stirring in the canyon below, and no smoke was coming from the Gold Hunters' cabin.

"They are late sleepers down there," he said.

Back to the fire he went, hastily kindled it, made some coffee, and, warmed up, he returned to his vigil.

"Why does Jack not leave, I wonder," he asked himself.

After a long while smoke began to curl upward from the cabin chimneys, and soon after a man came out and went to the stream for a bucket of water.

Still the scout kept his vigil, and at last, when noon was near, he said:

"I've seen every man thus far but Jack.

"Can he have left the cabin before I awoke?"

"It must have been so, and—"

He stopped short, for Texas Jack stood before him.

"By Jove, Jack, but this is a surprise, for I was watching for you to leave the cabin."

"I left before dawn."

"And got robbed of every bit of your supplies."

"How on earth did you know that?"

"I guessed it."

"You are a Yankee for guessing, if you were a border-born boy."

"I'll guess again."

"Do so."

"You are engaged to bring back supplies to them from the sutler at Fort Strong."

"Why, Bill, you are a mind reader."

"And you are to get fifty cents on every fifty cents you pay for supplies in uncoined gold, and not particular as to weight."

"Buffalo Bill, you were in the canyon last night?" cried Jack.

"Yes, and heard their clever mode of robbing you."

"But come, let us go to the cabin now and you can tell me all."

"I will."

After they had had dinner the two friends sat down and talked the whole matter over.

"Jack."

"Yes."

"Would you be willing to stay here on watch?"

"Oh, yes, I'll do anything you wish."

"Now they don't know of this cabin here, and there is nothing that will bring them here, at least until spring."

"No."

"The way here is through a canyon, as you know, that looks like a blind trail."

"Yes."

"You know we brought along provisions for two or three months, and one month's of those are gone."

"Just about."

"There is game galore here, if you only go far enough off to kill it, so they won't hear your shots."

"Yes."

"Then I have a bow and arrows I brought along, and you are as good as an Indian in that style of shooting, so can knock over a deer or turkey that comes near you here."

"Yes, I can."

"Then we have some books I brought along, and so I am going to ask you to stay and be on the watch."

"I'll be all right, Bill; but you?"

"I'll return at once, starting this afternoon, while the weather is good."

"I'll go back to our camp, send for more supplies; see what the news is from the fort, make my report to Colonel Miles, and in a month will return here, with the supplies for the Gold Hunters, so you can take them to them, and they will be running very short by then."

"Yes, they will."

"I'll bring one of the men back with me, and if you are tired he can relieve you; but I'll have a plan to propose then that will keep those fellows right where they are until I want them."

"Say the word and I'm with you, Pard Bill."

"I well know that, Jack."

"But now I'll take your four days' rations they allowed you, add more to them, and with my horse and one of the others will start on the back trail, for I will get well along by night, and it don't do to tarry now in this part of the country."

"It don't, indeed."

The two scouts then set to work to prepare for Buffalo Bill's departure.

He took along ten days' provisions, an ample supply of blankets, and packing all upon one animal, mounted his own riding horse, and started, the two men grasping hands warmly as they said good-by, for each knew that they might never meet again.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE MEETING OF FOES.

Pony Pete rushed his men through to the Red Willow camp, knowing he would have a good rest there.

He received a warm welcome, and quickly delivered the letters to Lieutenant Niles and Surgeon Powell.

The lieutenant seemed pleased at the trust placed in him, and said that he would be glad to make a winter fort of the camp.

Surgeon Powell at once reported to him that he was going on with Pony Pete and the four scouts to Buffalo Bill's winter camp, and added:

"It is just what I wished, and was going to ask the colonel, if I could do."

"Buffalo Bill and his scouts, with those here, will be nineteen in number, and they should have a surgeon, outside of services I can otherwise render."

"Cody and I have been such firm friends, we have been on so many scouts together, that I feel sure he will be glad to have me with him, and I am glad to go."

"I will be ready, Pony Pete, as soon as we get word from the Indian village, for I wish to be able to report to Cody whether the young Chief Running Eagle is there, or still out on the trail."

"If the latter, his old father will have to mourn him as dead," said Lieutenant Niles.

"Yes, it would seem so, but if he has been the one to kill his rival, Night Bird, who went out to kill him, and has scalped the two dead white men in their graves, he has been doing fairly well, in spite of being alone and having to face blizzards," Surgeon Powell remarked.

"You are right, sir," Pony Pete said, and it was decided that they should await the messenger expected from the Indian village.

Just at nightfall they arrived, the young brave of Red Willow's little band returning, accompanied by a sub-chief, for the Red Beaver had remained at the village, not caring to face his old chief again in anger.

The Red Willow heard the young chief's report stoically, though all knew how deeply he felt, when told that his son had not returned to the village.

Not a soul had seen him, or word come from him, since he had gone forth upon his mission to meet the Chief Night Bird in a duel, far away from the village.

"My son, the staff of my old age, is dead."

"He will not rule my loved people; but I, the Red Willow, still lives, still rules, and will do so, old as I am, and when I take the trail to the Happy Hunting Grounds the medicine men of our tribe will say who is to be their chief," said the old man with dignity, yet in a tone of deep sadness.

"I have faith, Chief Red Willow, that your brave son met his rival, now wears his scalp at his belt, and will one day return to his people, to lead them."

"He is not one to perish in the blizzards, for he knew how to prepare for them, and he will return," said Surgeon Powell, speaking in the Sioux tongue fluently.

His words gave the old chief renewed hope.

Then the young chief who had returned with the messenger said that a band of his people were encamped half a day's journey away, awaiting for the Red Willow and the crippled braves who had been so well cared for by the pale-face medicine man, White Beaver.*

He furthermore said that the band of the Black Buffalo was returning to the village as they left it.

At once did Surgeon Powell ask if they had a captive, a young pale-face brave, with them, meaning Percy Willard.

But this the young chief said that he did not know, and the Indian messenger

*The name given to Dr. Frank Powell by the Indians with whom the white beaver is a sacred animal—The Author.

whom Red Willow had sent, upon being questioned apart by the surgeon, said the same thing.

It was then considered best by Lieutenant Niles and Surgeon Powell to make an early start with the Indian band and their old chief, and go to meet the redskins sent for them, with every means at their disposal for carrying wounded men.

The force from the fort arrived soon after, and of the supplies they brought Lieutenant Niles made a liberal division with old Red Willow, that the still suffering braves should still have good food.

This attended to, the start was made the next morning, and five hours after the strange spectacle was witnessed of the meeting of the two bands of deadly foes, the palefaces being the ones to try and win their redskin enemies over by kindness.

The band from the village showed that they were painfully uneasy in the presence of their white foes, and it took diplomatic work on the part of old Red Willow to keep several hot-headed young braves from firing upon the soldiers, an act that at once would have precipitated a most deadly conflict.

Surgeon Powell and Lieutenant Niles recognized fully the gravity of the situation, and it was with a sigh of deep relief that they at last grasped the hand of Red Willow in farewell, and the two forces slowly moved apart.

The soldiers at once set out upon their retreat for their winter camp, and they had gone but half a dozen miles when it was discovered that Surgeon Powell, Pony Pete, and the four scouts who had come with the latter from the fort, were missing.

Where had they gone? They were supposed by Lieutenant Niles to be on ahead, and yet when he rode to the front in search of them they could not be found.

At once he determined to halt the command and return after the redskins, suspecting foul play on their part; but, as the order was upon his lips, suddenly there rang out a volley of rifles ahead, followed by the scouts' war cry and the yells of redskins.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A TRAP TO SPRING.

Surgeon Powell had kept his eyes fully open to all that had taken place during the meeting of the soldiers and Indians.

He had noticed one Indian in particular, whom he heard speak English to one of the scouts, and after that watch all that was said most attentively.

This Indian soon after disappeared, and Surgeon Powell saw him gliding swiftly away in the timber.

Before the start back of the soldiers was made, Doctor Powell called to Pony Pete and told him to get his four scouts and come with him.

"Pete, there is going to be an attempt to ambush the command, I feel certain.

"Old Red Willow is not in it, but there are some of the discontented braves along, and if one of them has not gone to give information to a band to lie in wait for us, then I am greatly mistaken."

"We'll take a different trail back then, sir."

"No, we, you and your scouts and I, will go ahead, and see what place will be chosen.

"It will be out of hearing of old Red Willow's party, so we will know about where to expect they will take up their ambush.

"Again, we will get in position first, for they will not be there as soon as we will, and when we know what their intention is, we can give them a surprise party."

"Good!

"That will be just it.

"Will you tell the lieutenant, sir?"

"I do not dare to, as there are other Indians watching, I am sure.

"We can keep the trap from being sprung upon the command."

With this Surgeon Powell slipped away.

The scouts followed, one by one, and the six men met on the back trail.

They rode rapidly, watching every position that would be a good place for ambush, and half a dozen miles away decided that they had hit the spot.

They had there a double advantage, for the Indians could be ambushed while ambushing.

Quickly they went into position, Surgeon Powell placing his men just where they would command any party that took up their hiding to fire upon a force passing along the trail.

From the place they felt sure the Indians would stand, a trail led back along the ridge, and escape was easy, while the ledge was so steep the soldiers could not get up on it to pursue.

A large force there could readily annihilate a small command.

But the cliffs were in natural terraces just there, and upon the one back of the one where the Indians were expected to form was where Surgeon Powell had taken up his position.

It completely commanded the terrace below and the retreat for some distance along the ridge.

None too soon did Surgeon Powell and the five scouts get located, for the officer, sweeping the country with his glass, called out:

"They are coming!"

All the scouts had repeating rifles, as did Surgeon Powell, and in addition, the redskins, if they took the terrace below, would be within reach of their revolvers.

"Men, they are many, we but few; but we can very readily cut them to pieces and prevent their red work.

"They deserve no mercy, after all we have done for them."

"Indeed they don't, sir.

"But are they in large force?" asked Pony Pete.

"All of 'em sixty.

"Take my glass."

The scout did so, and after awhile said:

"They are coming at a trot, and right along the ridge below us.

"This shows that they know the place well."

"Yes, without doubt."

"And, Surgeon Powell, the man in the lead is the young Chief Black Buffalo, the successor to Night Bird, while the brave by his side is my man, Red Beaver."

"Indeed!

"Then the Red and the White Beavers shall meet," said Surgeon Powell, with a smile, referring to his Indian name.

"He is a treacherous fellow, and deserves no mercy, while if he and the Black Buffalo both fall, I think it will end the ambition of the few young braves to take the place of old Red Willow."

"Yes, those two must be the first to fall, and there must be enough more to teach them a very severe lesson, for they are the discontents that followed the Chief Night Bird, and so are unfriendly to Red Willow.

"They will be in position in ten minutes, and soon after the command will be along."

"But we have the trappers trapped, sir, thanks to you, sir," said Pony Pete, and one and all crouched low in their hiding places, to await the springing of the double trap.

CHAPTER L.

THE FIGHT ON THE RIDGE.

The Indians left their horses under a guard of half a dozen braves back on the ridge.

Fifty in number, they were soon in position on the ledge commanding the trail beneath, and which passed through a cut just there.

It was an ideal place to ambush a foe.

The two Indians who were on watch for the coming soldiers were the Black Buffalo, the chief, and Red Beaver, who seemed to be an aide de camp.

A hundred yards back, on the upper ridge, or terrace, were the Surgeon Scout and his five men.

Suddenly, up the trail, an Indian horseman came into view.

He waved a red blanket, and came on at a lope.

It was evident that he was just ahead of the command, and had given a signal.

He rode swiftly along, and as he passed under the terrace called out in the Indian tongue that the soldiers were riding rapidly and in close order.

He also stated, what the redskins doubtless already knew, that the soldiers numbered forty.

This number he gave by holding up both hands four separate times.

"We must fire before they get the chance to do so.

"I'll wait until the command reaches yonder pine," whispered Surgeon Powell.

The scouts were ready, for their rifles were in hand, and each had a couple of revolvers lying on the rocks before him.

The Indian passed on, and soon after the command came in sight, the horses in a trot.

They had gotten rid of their charge of crippled Indians, and were returning light handed to reach camp as soon as possible.

Lieutenant Niles and his special scout were ahead, riding side by side, and the troopers were coming four abreast.

It would prove a fatal volley, indeed, fired into the command in close order.

Nearer and nearer they came. The lieutenant was discussing something with evident excitement, looked back, and the command came to a sudden halt.

But it was just as the pine tree was reached, and Lieutenant Niles had decided to return and find the surgeon and the scouts.

But, just then, as the Indians were growing uneasy at the halt, the Surgeon Scout shouted:

"Fire!"

The six repeating rifles rang out as one, and then began to rattle forth the other shots at will.

The Chief Black Buffalo and the brave Red Beaver dropped dead, the former killed by Doctor Powell, the latter by Pony Pete.

Others fell, too, and the rapid rattle of the repeating rifles sent death to many braves.

"Niles, ride down the ridge and cut off their retreat.

"Their ponies are a quarter of a mile back!"

The lieutenant had quickly formed his men for battle.

Hearing the suggestion of Surgeon Powell, he answered with a shout, waved his sword, and obeyed.

The Indians had been dazed by the trap sprung upon them.

They stood in dismay for full a minute, then turned and fled down the ridge.

But the lieutenant and his men were before them, dashed up the ridge, and captured their ponies before they could get to them.

In terror, the remnant of the band received a galling fire from the cavalry.

But one Indian was captured, for his pony pinned him under him in falling.

"Tell him to call to his comrades to await our departure and come back and care for their dead and wounded.

"They shall have a pony for each wounded brave, but no more," said Lieutenant Niles, and the scout interpreted what the officer said, and told the redskin to go.

He soon disappeared from sight, and the wounded Indians being counted, ten were found, and so that many ponies were left to them, and the command moved on its way, to meet Surgeon Powell and his scouts on the trail beyond the ridge.

"Powell, I owe you the lives of many of my brave boys, and my own as well.

"Words cannot express my appreciation," said Lieutenant Niles, as he warmly grasped the surgeon's hand.

"Don't speak of it, Niles.

"We got on to their game, so played trump cards against them.

"It was Night Bird's band, and Black Buffalo and Red Beaver, the brave of Pony Pete, were the leaders.

"We literally left only about a third of the band, for your carbine volley was a deadly one.

"Now they have got to send a courier after old Red Willow and submit to him or freeze.

"He will be glad of this wipe-out, you may be sure," was Surgeon Powell's reply.

In the fight not a scout had been hurt, and only three soldiers had received slight wounds.

These were quickly dressed by Surgeon Powell, and with the captured Indian ponies the command started at a brisk trot for the winter camp.

Reinforcements having all come in, with supplies, Lieutenant Niles prepared to make a fort of his camp, and having gotten ready for his start, Surgeon Powell and the five scouts left at dawn the next morning, to go to the relief of Buffalo Bill, intending to make their night camp where the fight with Black Buffalo had occurred, and Pony Pete had captured the Red Beaver.

A cheer and cries for good luck followed the little party as they rode out of camp, with their dozen of pack horses following, and Surgeon Powell and Pony Pete in the lead.

CHAPTER LI.

HELD UP BY A BLIZZARD.

Surgeon Powell and his scouts started from the winter camp of Lieutenant Niles, with a full knowledge of what was before them.

The Surgeon Scout was glad to see that matters had materialized in a very satisfactory manner, so he could tell Buffalo Bill.

A winter camp had been established, nearly a day's ride nearer to Buffalo Bill's camp than the fort, so help could be gotten from there two days sooner when wanted.

Also, Red Willow and his suffering braves had been well cared for and returned to their people with a full knowledge of the kindness of their white foes.

The turbulent band of the late young chief Night Bird had been almost wiped out, while its next chief, Black Buffalo, had been killed.

Whether the young Gold Hunter, Percy Willard, had been killed or taken a prisoner to the Indian village the Surgeon Scout could not tell, but he hoped that he was not dead, and if a prisoner, Red Willow would treat him well, after the way he had been treated.

Supplies were along sufficient for the winter for the scouts, and the Gold Hunters, if found, and if Buffalo Bill wished to move against the fugitive miners, the weather permitting, before spring, he would be able to do so, and just twenty men, all told, would be his force.

That the little relief party took big chances in the start, in the face of the breaking out of winter, Surgeon Powell knew; but he hoped to reach the sheltered camp, that Pony Pete told him had protected the Indians in the last blizzard, before a storm, and then it was little over half a day's ride from there to the winter quarters in the Cedar Canyon.

A brisk pace was set by the Surgeon Scout, for no one knew better than he just what horses could stand.

The skies were darkening, and it might come on to storm at any minute.

A short halt only was made at noon, for the skies looked ugly, and then the band pushed on.

They were none too soon, for when they came in sight of the camp the flakes of snow were beginning to fall.

"A snug place, but we can improve it.

"Never mind the horses now, but get axes and set to work," cried the surgeon.

The axes rang out merrily, trees fell, a strong shelter was built in a crevice of the rocks, the brush gathered by the Indians for their wicky-up was thrown on top, and within two hours' time, in the midst of the falling snow, the men were glad to know that safe retreat had been made for horses and men.

Wood had been gathered, a huge fire built, the horses were stripped of bridles, saddles, and packs, and these served to make a better shelter for the men.

Blankets were spread, the horses were blanketed, watered, and led into their snug retreat, and Surgeon Powell called out, cheerily:

"Night and a blizzard are upon us, boys; but we are ready for both."

It was certainly a relief for the tired men to feel that they were ready, and they sat down to a tempting supper with no dread of freezing to death in the blizzard.

Later, they turned into their blankets with thorough thankfulness at their good fortune.

The next morning the storm was still raging.

There was nothing for it but to remain in camp all day and another night.

"Old Red Willow and his party, detained by those wounded and dead braves that he waited for, doubtless, just about got to his village in time to escape this, for it came down from his mountain retreat," said Surgeon Powell.

"If he didn't get in, there'll be a lot of frozen redskins, sir," returned Pony Pete.

Then he added:

"But do you know I am very anxious about the chief, sir."

"No, he will take care of himself, for a better weather prophet I never knew, and he can stand more cold weather than an Esquimaux; but, Texas Jack is with him, you say, and being from Texas he may suffer."

"Yes, sir.

"But I hope we'll find them in the winter camp when we get there."

"So do I."

"If they are not, I shall be alarmed for them."

"As I will, Pony Pete, and I will start on the trail to look them up."

"Take me with you, sir, for whiskey would freeze before I would," pleaded Pony Pete.

"I will, for two are better than one in weather like this," was the reply.

So the day passed, then another night, and the morning following the storm showed signs of breaking and preparations were made to go on their way.

After an early dinner, they mounted and pushed ahead on the trail for the winter camp.

CHAPTER LII.

THE SPECTRE IN THE TIMBER.

Sombrero Sam, obeying the orders of Buffalo Bill, had returned to the winter camp in Cedar Canyon, and set to work to thoroughly make it as weather-proof as possible for man and beast.

A store house was built for supplies, wood was cut and carried near the fires, where it was piled up for use.

Scout Larry and his party, after parting with Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack, and knowing decidedly which way the Gold Hunters had gone, started on the back trail for the mining camp.

Obedying orders, Larry had left his last camping place before dawn, so as to reach the timber where the three graves were while it was yet dark.

They did this, and silently camped in the timber near the graves.

What it was no one knew, but all saw it, and so amazed and startled they were that none of the scouts thought of his rifle until it was gone.

In the gray light of early dawn they had seen flit by them a form.

It was the form of a human being and was clad in white, while it seemed to

glide by, and went with remarkable swiftness.

They had not been fifteen minutes in waiting, so all were awake, and from the lips of each one had broken the cry:

"Look there!"

The scouts were halted in the edge of the timber, and had not unsaddled their horses or built a fire.

They could not be seen by any one passing, but their startled exclamation and words certainly reached the ears of the one they beheld.

He gave a sudden bound, and fairly seemed to fly over the ground, going directly toward the three graves.

They saw him then suddenly disappear.

They had said no more, and did not move.

Simply in startled and dumb amazement they sat and stared.

To have asked any one of them in the broad glare of day if they believed in ghosts, they would have laughed at and scouted the idea.

To have asked them, in the uncertain gray of dawn, seeing that white-clad form, and beholding it disappear right where those three graves were, in the timber, each one would have answered:

"What was it, if not a ghost?"

"Well!" said Larry, who was the first to speak.

"What was it?" asked all.

"Pards, I never believed in spooks, but I won't say I don't now."

"Nor me."

"It was a human."

"What was it doing here, if it wasn't the spirit of one of them in the graves?"

"I wish day would break quick."

"I'm glad we don't have to camp near here."

"The chief said find out what we could here."

"We have found out more than I want to."

"I hopes we don't see it again."

And so the comments went on, from one to the other, while the day gradually dispelled the darkness.

The men then went over and looked about the graves.

They were all as they had left them.

No trail was visible, and yet the form they had seen had certainly gone directly there, or by there.

Larry made a long and thorough search of the surroundings of the graves, for a mile or more.

Nothing could be found to account for the form in white, and they could find no sign to cause them to believe that the place had been visited by any one, or any one dwelt near the graves.

"We will go on to the winter camp, pards, and I'll tell Sombrero Sam just what we saw, so he can decide as to putting any man here on duty," said Larry.

"I don't want to be the man."

"Nor me."

This seemed to be the general opinion, that no one cared to be the one to be put on guard.

"Well, pards, it is for Sombrero Sam to say, and if he sends a man here, I for one would not refuse, and I don't believe Buffalo Bill has a scout that would do so."

With this Larry gave the order to mount and start for the winter camp.

They looked well as they went along for any trail, or signs, that might appear, but nothing was seen.

At last, in the middle of the afternoon, they turned off the trail into the canyon where was located the winter camp of the scouts.

The turn-off showed no trail, so hard was the earth just there, and had any stranger passed along the trail he would never suspect the presence of a camp near.

As they pushed on up the canyon and came in sight of the camp, they were greeted with a hearty cheer of welcome, for the threatening skies told of weather to come.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SCOUTS IN WINTER QUARTERS.

Sombrero Sam had not been idle. A strong stockade was built around the camp, and a fence run across the canyon, so that the horses could not stray.

The arrival of Larry and his men gave that many more hands for work, and all were anxious to make a winter fort of the place before their chief should return.

Sam and Larry walked apart and had a long talk, and to the surprise of the latter, when he told his story about the white form he had seen in the timber near the graves, the former said:

"I have seen it, too."

"What is it, Sam? Not a spook?"

"Don't believe in 'em."

"Where did you see it?"

"Near the graves."

"Where else?"

"Passing the entrance to this canyon."

"At night?"

"Both times."

"How can we find out who or what it is?"

"Lay for it, and try to lasso it. We must keep a man constantly on the watch."

And so it was arranged. The mystery of the canyon wraith was to be solved.

The next day it was that the blizzard came roaring up the canyon, two hours before night.

It did not catch the scouts unprepared, for they had completed their large cabin, and their shelter for the horses; while, to finish their little fort had only the stockade wall to build.

A large stock of grass was put away for hay for the horses, and wood enough had been piled up to last them a month.

Into their shelter they now were driven, and after a good, hot supper they began to sing and enjoy themselves by playing cards, dominos, or checkers, as the fancy suited them, for they had brought games and books along, as also a violin, banjo, and guitar.

Just one dozen in number, the scouts were a dashing, jolly lot of fellows, ready to mourn with a friend in sorrow, laugh with him in joy, fight any foe, share any danger, and proud as peacocks that they were Border Scouts and had for their chief Buffalo Bill.

After forty hours of storm the clouds broke, and the scouts were out at once.

Then they began to think of their comrades.

Had Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack been in proper shelter during the blizzard?

Had Pony Pete left the fort and been caught out in the storm?

Were their three comrades dead or alive?

Was the white form that haunted the timber around the three graves frozen to death, or could not his kind freeze?

The snow was cleared away, the horses let out, and all things put in the best of shape.

Two of the men who went on a hunt for game soon found some turkeys, and got several, with a fine buck on their way back.

Cutting holes in the ice of the creek, they caught a fine mess, and were going to camp well pleased with their luck, when they heard a hail behind them.

"Surgeon Powell and Pony Pete!" was the cry, as they recognized the two horsemen approaching.

CHAPTER LIV.

SEEN AGAIN.

And the two scouts also saw that Surgeon Frank Powell and Pony Pete were not alone; quite a cavalcade was seen following, some distance back.

These were the other four scouts and the pack horses.

On their way they, too, had secured some game, so there was every prospect of a feast for supper.

Sombrero Sam and his comrades were delighted at this addition to their force, and especially to welcome Surgeon Powell.

All knew the worth of the officer, not only as a most able physician and surgeon, but also as a splendid plainsman.

He had long since won the title of "Surgeon Scout," and when he took a trail all knew that he was sure to go to the end of it.

"We did not expect you, sir, so did not prepare for you; but we will put up another bunk to-morrow, and you can occupy the chief's corner until he comes," said Sam.

"See here, pard, I am on this scout as one of you, so expect me to take things as I find them, and share alike with you, as I know Cody does," was the answer.

After a hearty supper, and all were enjoying a smoke, the scouts saw that there was something on the mind of Surgeon Powell.

The story of the Red Willow camp had been told, of Pony Pete's ride to the fort and capture of a prisoner, and the finding of the revolver of Percy Willard, with comments upon his unknown fate.

But, the Surgeon Scout had the look of one who was troubled, and at last it came out what was the cause.

"Men, I don't like your chief's non-appearance," he said. "I don't understand why he, or Texas Jack, has not returned with news of their trail."

"They expected to go into the mining country if they had to."

"Then that was an everlasting trail; but, I do not believe those Gold Finders pushed on any further than they had to during this weather, and were satisfied in resting for the winter wherever they could find good shelter."

"We had hoped the chief and Jack would follow us in very quickly after our return, but they have not."

"That is what makes me anxious, and I will consequently start upon their trail to-morrow—I and Pony Pete."

All the scouts called out that they wanted to go, and asked the doctor to let them draw lots.

"But I know where we left the chief," Larry pled.

"All right, draw lots, for I'm lucky, only I'll say, sir, if I lose you'll take two, letting me be one," Pony Pete urged.

"You can draw lots, Pete, and see what your luck is, and if I decide to take two of you along, and you lose, you shall be the other," assured the doctor.

Lots were drawn amid much excitement. A number of checkers were put in a bag, all of them black save one, which was red, and the man drawing the red was to go.

Sam was the first to draw, and got a black checker.

Larry drew next—also a black one.

It went on until all but Pony Pete had drawn, and the red checker still was in the bag.

"Thanks—you left this for me," and Pony Pete took out the red checker.

They were to start the next morning, before dawn, so all arrangements were made at once.

It was two hours before dawn when the surgeon and the scout rode away, the band being all up to see them off.

They rode briskly, as it was their intention to rest at the graves, and Pony Pete, having been twice over the trail, led the way.

As they reached the timber the scout suddenly halted, for his horse evidently saw something which his rider did not.

Another instant, and there darted across the trail a human form clad in white!

Both horses were so startled that they wheeled as though on a pivot, and tried to dash away.

But they were quickly halted, though the quick turn had nearly unseated their riders.

But for this, the Surgeon Scout and Pony Pete might have captured the spook, which both plainly saw.

CHAPTER LV.

MAN OR SPOOK.

"It caught us napping, Pete."

"It did, indeed, sir, for had I been

warned in time I could have caught it with my lariat."

"It was a man."

"A dead one, sir."

"Nonsense, the dead do not walk the earth."

"It was all in white, doctor."

"Oh, yes, but that is no proof of a ghost."

"What was it, then, sir?"

It was evident that Pony Pete was a little shaken by what he had seen.

"A man, of course."

"It was too dark to see, and my horse whirled so quickly he nearly unseated me, so I got only a glance at him in the darkness."

"Then, too, he caught us in this rocky cut, where we could not pursue."

"Yes, sir."

"But didn't it fly?"

"It went out of sight very quickly."

"I believe that he was as much startled as we were."

"Who and what it is bothers me."

"Well, we must find out when we can, and to do it we must lie out in this timber day and night."

"I'd want company."

The surgeon laughed, and said:

"Well, we'll try it together, after we have found the chief."

"Are those graves near?"

"Right in the direction he went, sir."

"Ah!"

"I guess he was late in getting back to his graveyard roost."

"Yes, for it is past the hour when they say graveyards yawn."

"A little belated, I guess, hunting food."

"What would he want to eat?"

"A good venison steak, and I guess about three fingers of straight whiskey would warm him up, for it's a cold night, Pete."

"Yes, sir, and I've about got a chill from seeing that frisky graveyard tramp."

Again the Surgeon Scout laughed, and said:

"We'll soon halt and build a fire for breakfast, and then you'll be all right."

"I'm with you, sir, if it's even to be a ghost hunt."

"But how does that pilgrim live out in this waterless country, with no shelter?"

"He's got a retreat somewhere, you may be certain, and I guess he could tell us something we'd like to know about the changing of the guide's body in the grave to an Indian's, as well as the scalping of the white men."

"You think he did it, then, sir?"

"I think that he must know who did, for some one did it, and that spooky individual is about the only moving thing to be seen in this barren land, save coyotes."

"That's so, sir."

"But here are the graves."

"All right, we'll pass right on, find a halting place for our horses in the timber, and I'll slip back here."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"That will leave me alone."

"I don't wish to leave the horses alone, in case that spook may like to ride, and watching us now, he might run off with our outfit."

"That's so, sir."

"It will be dawn in half an hour or so, and then spooks must take the chances of prowling around where guns are."

They had now ridden on to the timber where the camps had been before located, and there Surgeon Powell dismounted and left the horses in the care of Pony Pete.

He made a wide detour, and gradually drew near the three graves.

As he did so he came to a sudden halt.

Distinctly as he could in the darkness, he saw a form clad in white, standing by the graves, or at the spot which Pony Pete had pointed out as being where they were.

The form was in the shadow of the pines about the graves.

The Surgeon Scout was in the timber

a hundred feet beyond, and the space between was open.

He decided to halt where he was until dawn broke, and so stepped to the shelter of a tree.

Looking up again, he saw that the white form was gone.

He supposed that he had gotten a tree between it and himself, so moved to the right, then to the left.

But the white form had most mysteriously glided away.

It had gone as noiselessly as a ghost.

The Surgeon Scout rushed forward across the open space and stopped at the graves.

He saw the three graves in the dim light.

But the form had gone.

As he gazed about him he suddenly heard a loud challenge.

"Halt right there, or I fire!"

The next instant came a shot, then another and another.

Then the firing ceased.

It had come, as did the challenge, from over where Pony Pete had been left guarding the horses.

But what did the silence mean?

Quickly toward the scene ran the Surgeon Scout.

The day was creeping over the plain as he drew near the timber where he had left Pony Pete, and he could see now distinctly.

But in the timber it was still dark.

"Ho, Pony Pete!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"You challenged and fired?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what?"

"The spook."

"With what result?"

"He vanished, sir, like the spook he is," was the reply of Pony Pete.

CHAPTER LVI.

CAUGHT IN A BLIZZARD.

Approaching the spot where Pony Pete stood, the Surgeon Scout saw that he was much moved.

He knew that the scout was as brave as a lion, and a dead shot with rifle and revolver.

He was not easily rattled, but now he certainly was considerably so.

"Say, Pete, don't feel bad, for you simply missed your man, that is all."

"Maybe I did, for I was that nervous I couldn't take aim."

"How was it?"

"I was standing here, sir, when suddenly I saw a white form flying toward me."

"Yes."

"Then I challenged, for I won't shoot a spook without warning."

"Yes, I heard your challenge."

"And instead of halting the whatever-it-is just wheeled short to the left and went on like a deer."

"Well?"

"Then I fired, and it kept on."

"You fired three times."

"I suppose so, sir, but I kept pulling trigger, and the spook just skipped on."

"You may have wounded him, at least."

"Maybe so, sir."

"We will see after awhile, for daylight is here."

"Yes, sir, we'll take his trail then, if he leaves any!"

The surgeon scout laughed at the way Pony Pete put it, and said:

"Now, we'll get breakfast, for we wish to push on to that shelter Larry told us of by night."

"Yes, sir."

Wood was gathered and a fire built, and with water from their canteens they made coffee.

There was no grass or water for the horses, but they were given a quart of corn each, and would find good grazing and a stream further on.

Breakfast over, they began the search for a trail.

But not the slightest trace of a trail could they find, perfect plainsmen though they both were.

They however took the direction that Pony Pete had seen the white form go, and kept it for some distance.

Nothing was found, however, to reward their search, so they bore away on their direct way, not wishing to pass Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack should they be returning.

On they went to the noon halting place, and there the horses had both water and grass.

"Pete."

"Yes, sir."

"I have been anxious about this matter."

"Yes, sir; it don't look right."

"It is not settled, and another storm is hatching."

"It does look that way."

"We must have a good dinner, then push on for that place of shelter in the mountains, for, mark my words, this is going to be no gentle zephyr we are going to have."

Pony Pete cast his eyes knowingly about the horizon, and what he saw convinced him that Surgeon Powell was reading the signs of the Heavens correctly.

He hastily gathered wood, a good dinner was soon cooking, and the horses had been stripped of their saddles and bridles to give them a thorough rest, so they could the better stand the hard ride of the afternoon.

Larry had told them of a sheltered place in the mountains, where grass and water were plentiful.

They had halted there with the chief, and upon their return also, and had built a good wicky-up and shelter for the horses among the rocks.

"You can live out a blizzard there, but Heaven help you if you don't reach it before the storm breaks," Larry had said to them in directing them.

So to this shelter they were making their way.

Between their noon camp and that shelter the country was open, barren and woodless and waterless.

The hoped-for haven was in the shelter of the mountains, with pines and cedars to shelter them and their horses, outside of the retreats the scouts had erected and made close and snug.

"Come, Pete, we must increase our pace," said Surgeon Powell, as the mountains seemed yet a long way off.

"It's hard on the horses, sir."

"They must stand it, for look there!"

Pony Pete did not care for a second glance.

He saw that winter had been making no shams in its preceding bad weather, but was really upon them, and fiercely.

The clouds were growing blacker and blacker, the air was piercing cold, and the snow was threatening to fall heavily at any moment.

Should it fall the trail so well marked would soon be obliterated, and then what could they do?

To return to their last camp would but be to find an exposed one, and little possibility of making it any better.

To go clear back would be madness, for, on the snow-clad plain, what had they to guide them, even did they escape freezing to death?

To push on for the shelter in the mountains was their only hope, and if they missed this they were doomed.

If Surgeon Powell regretted his coming in search of Buffalo Bill he did not show it.

If Pony Pete felt sorry that the lot had fallen to him to come, he let no shadow come upon his face.

Both men, the officer and the scout, knew their danger.

They were aware of all they had to face.

But neither shrunk from it.

Stern-faced, silent, with heads bent to the freezing blasts they rode on.

The horses seemed to feel that it was for them to do or die.

They went ahead as though they knew that they must not fail their riders, or the doom of all was sealed.

On, on they went with tireless hope.

The mountains drew nearer and nearer, yet still seemed afar off.

But then the snow began to fall.

"Take your bearings while we can see the trail about," sternly said Surgeon Powell.

Both did so.

On they went, the snow rapidly whitening the plains.

The foothills were reached, the ascent begun, and still on they pressed.

At last the snow almost blocked their way.

The driving sleet blinded them, and from the lips of Pony Pete broke the words of despair:

"My God! We are lost!"

CHAPTER LVII.

LOST.

When Buffalo Bill rode away from the lone cabin in the mountains, it was with a pang of regret at having to leave his faithful pard, Texas Jack, alone as he did.

He knew that Jack would be all right, as far as comfort went, but should the Gold Hunters happen to find him, they would then know that he was a spy upon them.

Of course, that would mean death to the scout unless he could get the best of the fight.

There was one thing, however, in Jack's favor, and that was, if found, it would doubtless be by a couple of hunters only, and then the scout would be fully able to take care of himself, and more, could pack up and get away from the cabin, taking the trail back to the winter quarters.

All these things flashed through the mind of Buffalo Bill as he rode along.

Fortunately for him, snow falling in that part of the country did not remain long upon the ground, save in places where the wind blew it in great quantities.

The warm sunshine that followed the blizzards quickly dispelled the snow and ice, and so Buffalo Bill was not troubled much on his trail.

He made his camp for the night in sheltered spot, and the next morning pushed on rapidly, for he read the skies aright.

They were threatening a storm.

Seeing that the storm must break before night, he decided to take no chances, but seek the shelter where he had halted before, and which had been made secure by the scouts then with him.

He had ample time to prepare, so cut more bushes and protected the better his own and the shelter for his horse.

Water was right at hand, grass was plentiful, and his horse was soon grazing upon it, and near enough to the retreat to be quickly taken in when there was need for it.

"This is going to be a terror, or all signs fail," said the scout, and he again went over his work, to leave nothing undone that he would have cause to regret when the howling tempest was upon him.

Wood in abundance was cut and dragged up to where he could put it up on the fire without exposing himself, wind-checks were built, to better protect the fire and retreat, and the supplies and blankets were stowed away in a secure corner.

"I'd be dry in here if it poured in torrents, and certainly the snow will only make it warmer, and my fire shall be kept going."

"Then, too, my horse will be all right in his den, and he has ample room to move about, so we won't find it so bad, after all."

"But now for a deer, for I have seen several run by, and a turkey or two would be acceptable."

So saying, he took his rifle and snatched out for game.

The storm was now almost upon him, but this did not deter him from his search for game, and half a mile away

from his retreat he brought down two wild turkeys.

Tying these together, he threw them over his shoulder and started back, for the snow was beginning to fly.

But just then he saw a herd of deer rushing for shelter in the canyons, and raising his rifle, he brought down a fine young buck.

To dress the animal, cut off the head and feet, and also shoulder it was little work, and he started at a brisk pace for camp.

His fire was burning briskly, and he saw the smoke through the driving snow.

The storm was increasing in fury each moment, the cold becoming more and more intense, and, in spite of his heavy load of rifle, deer, and turkeys, he began to go at a trot to get into camp with all dispatch.

As he was about to turn into the sheltered canyon where his retreat was, he turned to glance back over the wide expanse of plain, and take a look at the howling blizzard that was growing fiercer and fiercer each moment.

As he did so, down the mountain a few hundred yards he saw two dark objects.

"Horsemen, as I live!"

He looked closer, and cried:

"They have halted, bewildered by the storm, and seeing no trail are lost.

"Who can they be?"

"Why, who but two of my brave boys looking for me.

"But if foes they need help now, or death will claim them mighty soon."

Raising his voice, he shouted as loud as he could.

He saw the horsemen move, and once more he called.

"They certainly hear me.

"But they will hear this," and he fired his rifle once, twice, thrice!

The two horsemen did hear him and came on.

The horses quickened their pace, and soon Buffalo Bill called again.

The men heard him now, and quickly rode forward up to where he stood.

"Buffalo Bill!"

"Frank Powell and Pony Pete!

"But come, follow me, for we have not a moment to lose," and Buffalo Bill led the way at a run.

He cared not for the weight he carried.

He only saw that Frank Powell and Pony Pete were half frozen.

The horses followed as best they could, the men merely clinging in their saddles.

A few minutes more and the game was dashed down, the men pulled from their saddles and dragged into the shelter, into which the wind was driving the heat of the fire, a flask placed to the lips of one, then the other, and then leaving his two half-frozen comrades to thaw out, Buffalo Bill ran out into the storm, just as Surgeon Frank Powell murmured:

"We were lost and doomed, Bill, but you saved us."

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE FUGITIVE IN WHITE.

Buffalo Bill had done what he temporarily could for his two comrades, in getting them under shelter and in the warm glow of the fire, with the addition of dosing them with whiskey, and then he had darted out to care for the horses.

He knew that they would suffer also if left in that fierce cold.

Off came saddles and bridles, and pack, and then the blankets were put on and the three animals trotted to the shelter close at hand.

Once there, Buffalo Bill ran to his own horse, that he had left out to feed, and he, too, was quickly blanketed and put under shelter, which was then closed up tightly with a rubber blanket, and boughs already cut to put over the opening.

Back to his retreat he then ran, and he had to move quickly, or he, too, would get benumbed with cold, and a pot of coffee was quickly put on, to give the two brave men whom he had saved.

Down their throats the coffee was poured, at a temperature almost scalding, and the good effects were soon seen.

"We are thawing, Bill."

"Thank God!

"You were almost in the icicle stage when you got here."

"Our horses are—"

"All right, in as snug a shelter as we have here, and it is well they are, for this is the worst blizzard I've tackled this year."

"It is, indeed, and half an hour more of it would have finished us."

"About five minutes more would have done me, doctor," said Pony Pete.

"I thought I was tough, but that wind just froze me to the marrow.

"But I am all right now, save numb."

"And I'm getting on deck again," Pete said.

"You'll be all right when you have had some supper, pard, and I'll get it right away, while you watch me.

"But listen to that wind, and the sleet cuts like a knife, if it touches you."

The Chief of Scouts was soon at work getting supper.

Venison steaks were broiling, bacon on the fire, more coffee boiling, and a hoe cake was in the ashes.

"You're a dandy cook, Bill, as I've always said," Doctor Powell remarked as he watched the chief of scouts.

"None better, sir."

"Why, I've seen Chief Cody toss a pancake thirty feet in the air and catch it on the other side as it came down."

"There's nothing the matter with you, Pony Pete, at least with your tongue," remarked Buffalo Bill, dryly.

Supper was now served, just two hours after the arrival of the half-frozen men in camp, and darkness had now come on.

More wood was put on the fire, large logs to burn all night, the blankets were spread, pipes lighted, and the men who so lately had faced almost certain death began to tell why they were there.

"I am glad, indeed, that you came, doctor, for you are just the one to help me, and you, Pete, brought four more scouts with you."

"Yes, sir, they are in Fort Cody, as Doctor Powell has named our winter quarters, seventeen of them."

"So with you, Surgeon Powell and myself we have twenty men, and Jack is on duty further on in the mountains."

Then Buffalo Bill told how they had found the Gold Hunters and where.

Also that Texas Jack had been left on duty in the little ravine, and there was nothing to be done by them but to return to the winter quarters as soon as the weather would allow.

Then Buffalo Bill heard of all that had happened, the finding of Percy Willard's revolver, the white form seen haunting the three graves, and all there was for him to know.

The chief listened to all there was to tell him, made few comments the while, and then said:

"As you saw the white form at the graves, Surgeon Powell, there is no doubt of its existence there; but, you know, plainmen are superstitious, and, though I would trust Pony Pete under any other circumstances, I know that he has an antipathy for ghosts."

"I don't like what I can't understand, chief," laughed Pete.

"It is there, Bill, whosoever or whatever it is," remarked Frank Powell.

"We must find out what it is, then."

"But we have the winter for it, for Texas Jack has the Gold Hunters corralled, and if they move he will quickly let us know, or leave word for us to follow."

"This is the worst of our storms this year, and I fear will last for some days; but we must get back, get supplies and be at Jack's cabin within the month, or we'll find all those Gold Hunters dead, I fear."

"But now to turn in, for we have plenty of time to talk matters over."

It was a fearful night, and time and again the three men woke up to congrat-

ulate themselves that they were so securely sheltered.

The storm had not lost an atom of its fury in the morning, and so continued all day, and for several more before its fierce winds were broken.

At last, after five days spent in the shelter, the three scouts came out of their retreat, and prepared for a start back to camp.

It was a hard journey of three days, and darkness of the third caught them going through the Haunted Timber, as Pony Pete called the place where the graves were.

Buffalo Bill had wished to pass the night there, but the weather was too cold, so they pushed on, and were passing near the graves when the chief of scouts cried!

"Look there!"

In an instant he had his horse in a run in chase of a white form.

Twice he raised his rifle, but lowered it again, not being willing to fire, and a moment later the fugitive in white disappeared most suddenly.

Quickly the scout drew rein, and just in time, for a deep ravine was before him.

And so the fugitive in white once more escaped.

"Well, that blizzard did not kill him, that's certain," said Doctor Powell, as they rode on once more.

The winter camp was reached two hours later, and the greeting the three men received made the canyon echo again and again.

Then Sombrero Sam reported that his men had seen the fugitive in white several times, but could never capture him or kill him.

"No, no, don't fire at him, but take him alive," were Buffalo Bill's orders.

So the days went by in Fort Cody, with cold, blustering weather, until Buffalo Bill began to prepare to return to Texas Jack with the supplies for the Gold Hunters, and Surgeon Powell, Pony Pete and Larry were to accompany him on the perilous expedition.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE LONE VIGIL.

Texas Jack had a brave heart to remain in that cabin on his lone vigil.

He saw his chief ride away with a choking sensation in the throat, for he looked upon the days that were to pass there before he again saw him, if he ever did.

The bitter blizzard that followed the departure of Buffalo Bill was the cause of great anxiety to Texas Jack.

He was comfortable enough, but then he had a feeling of almost regret that he was, as he feared his comrade was suffering terribly.

If he had gone beyond shelter camps, he decided that he had gone to his doom, and the reader has seen that such would have been the case.

The storm over, Texas Jack made his way to the cliff to have a look down in the canyon.

Both fires in the Gold Hunters' cabin were burning well, from the smoke, the horses had been turned out to feed as best they could, and he saw the men moving about; two of them starting out on a hunt, leading a horse to carry back their game.

"They are not having a happy time of it, I know, and they'll suffer more as provisions run shorter; but they brought it upon themselves by their crimes," said Texas Jack.

The days passed on, and one afternoon the scout was out on a deer hunt, and was raising his rifle to fire upon a passing herd, when a shot was fired not four hundred yards from where he was.

In an instant he had dropped down and sought a hiding place.

He soon saw the two game hunters he had before seen.

They had killed a deer, cleaned it, and strapping it upon the horse they had with them, started back to their camp.

"That was a close call, and they were within three miles of my cabin."

"I must be on the watch for them, and also pray for bad weather, so that they will not come so far from their camp."

So saying, Texas Jack returned to his cabin, and did not dare to fire, though he saw a number of deer.

Several days after he was out again, and fully half a dozen miles from camp, when he heard the rapid clatter of hoofs.

Instantly, he bounded to the shelter of some pines and stood ready to fight if he had to.

The horse was coming at a run, and down a canyon that pierced the mountain parallel with the one in which his own cabin was located.

Of course, it must be one of the Gold Hunters, he thought.

The trail from the canyon would lead within a hundred feet of where he was in hiding.

Eagerly he waited.

The resounding hoof-falls came nearer and nearer.

Another moment and the horse came into view.

Upon his back was a rider, and the scout uttered an exclamation of amazement, in spite of himself at what he saw.

What he saw was calculated to startle him.

He beheld a large white horse, as white as snow, and with long flowing mane and tail.

The animal was without saddle, bridle, or anything to guide him, and was bounding along at a rapid pace.

And the rider?

That was what the eyes of the scout were riveted upon.

He was a man of fine physique, with long gray hair and beard, and eyes that were fixed ahead of him as though he saw what Texas Jack could not see.

The man was clad in heavy moccasins and leggins, and over his body was a large grizzly bear skin, to protect him from the biting cold.

It was secured about his waist with a belt, and around his head, instead of a cap or hat, was tied a silk handkerchief of scarlet hue.

In one hand the man carried a knife of huge proportions, so large that it seemed to have been changed from a sabre-bayonet.

Such were the horse and rider that went by Texas Jack like the wind.

"A madman certain!" cried Texas Jack from his place of hiding.

"But who and what is he?" the scout asked himself, as he peeped at the flying horseman from his covert.

"Where did he come from; where is he going, and what is he doing here?"

Texas Jack asked the questions, yet could not answer them.

"He is not one of the Gold Hunters, that is certain."

"He is—I do not know what, and how can I find out, is the question."

"I must keep an eye on that man."

"I could have dropped him with a bullet, but that would have been wrong."

Back to his cabin went Texas Jack, much impressed by what he had seen.

But once, twice again did he view the same weird horseman dash by him, and yet he was no nearer learning anything about him than when he had first seen him.

And thus time wore on, with good weather and bad, principally the latter, with a visit to the cliff to have a look at the Gold Hunters when possible, and a hunt after game when needed.

The time was drawing near when he expected Buffalo Bill back, for he knew that the Gold Hunters were hunting daily, as though game was all they had to live upon.

"Another blizzard is coming, that is certain, and it will be a bad one, too, so will detain Chief Cody for another week at least."

"If those fellows have not laid in a good supply of venison they'll starve, that is all."

"My! how the storm comes up."

"I only hope Buffalo Bill is not on the way, or far from shelter if he has started," and driven by the cold, Texas Jack retreated to his cabin, looked after the horses, built up his fire, and was preparing supper when outside came a voice crying:

"Ho, within there, Texas Jack!"

CHAPTER LX.

WHAT TEXAS JACK WITNESSED.

Texas Jack made a spring for the door, at the call from without, and he the next moment saw before him his chief, Surgeon Frank Powell, Pony Pete, and Larry.

He had recognized the voice of Buffalo Bill, and muffled up as all were, he soon knew who they were.

"Ah, how glad I am to see you all."

"I knew you'd be on time, Bill, if the weather allowed you to get here," he said, earnestly.

"And you are all right, Jack?"

"Yes, indeed, but mighty glad to have company."

"But come in, for those storms here freeze one's very heart."

"You see the wind is so terrible."

"It is, indeed."

"But I know what a comfortable cabin you have, Jack, and there is room for all of us."

"Room to spare, and you have supplies, I see, so must have brought enough to last the Gold Hunters the winter," and he gazed at the pack horses that had been brought along.

"Ah, yes, we have enough to keep them in the trap until we want them."

"Good!"

"But let us hurry to get the supplies put away and the horses stabled, for you see the storm is coming."

All set to work with a will, and the supplies were soon safely stored, the horses put in the stable and blanketed, and the men gathered about the blazing fire in the cabin.

Texas Jack hustled about getting supper, drawing upon the fresh supplies and also upon the game he had on hand.

The meal was a good one, and all enjoyed it greatly, chatting cheerily the while, for they rejoiced in the contrast within doors and the savage storm without.

"Well, Jack, are the Gold Hunters all safe?" asked Buffalo Bill, after supper was over and pipes had been lighted.

"Safe as rats in a trap, sir."

"I am glad to hear that."

"But have you seen them lately?"

"To-day."

"They must be short of provisions."

"Oh, yes, as they hunt a great deal and that is proof."

"I go up to the cliff every day I can and watch them through my glass."

"Have you seen anything of importance among them?"

"Well, two of the men came mighty near here hunting one day, and nearly caught me."

"Did they see you?"

"Just missed doing so by firing at some deer before I did."

"That gave their presence away, and I laid low."

"You were lucky."

"I have seen their hunters twice, but each time was in hiding myself."

"It would have been bad for you had they seen you."

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"But do you know I saw a strange happening in their camp one day?"

"What was it?"

"I was watching them from the cliff one morning a couple of weeks ago, when out of the cabin came the whole gang."

"I saw something was wrong, and I watched them closely, for my glass showed me their faces distinctly."

"Yes."

"They had a quarrel, that was certain, and it seemed as though all were going to join in, when one stepped forward and made some proposition."

"They agreed to it with a shout, and

then the man who proposed it stepped to the front with another man, the one you said was the leader, and they tossed something into the air."

"I judged that it was a silver dollar, and each time it fell they all ran up and looked down upon it."

"This was repeated five times, and then the one who proposed it folded his hands upon his heart and faced the crowd."

"Gentry stepped forward, put his lariat noose about his neck, and led the way to a tree."

"The man following?"

"Indeed he did, as game as anything."

"And then?"

"His hands were tied behind his back, and at word from Gentry, for I could see all their actions, the end of the lariat was placed over a limb of the tree, and all of the men caught hold and gave a quick haul."

"Hanging the man?"

"Yes, sir, his body was run up into the air, and there it hung for hours, when it was cut down and buried, the grave being close under the cliff."

"Another murder they have to answer for," said Buffalo Bill, sternly.

"Yes, for such it was."

"Well, as soon as this storm passes over you can make your second visit to them, Jack."

"I am ready, sir, when you say the word."

"And perhaps you'll find out what that hanging meant."

"I'll try to, chief."

"But I have something more startling than that to tell you."

"Indeed?"

"I have, sir, and it is not about the Gold Hunters."

"Who then?"

"A wild horse and wild rider I have seen," was the earnest reply of Texas Jack.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MOUNTAINS.

Buffalo Bill had been a most attentive listener to the story of Texas Jack, of the strange hanging of one of the Gold Hunters by the others.

They could not account for it, and all had wondered just what it meant.

When the scout, who had been in exile there, had reported that he had something else to tell, all were attentive at once.

"Tell us whatever you have seen, or discovered, Jack, for you have been by no means idle here, it seems," said Buffalo Bill.

"I'll tell you that the Gold Hunters and myself are not the only ones in these mountains."

"You have seen others, then?"

"I have seen one other, a wild horse and mad rider, as I said."

"Who and what is he?"

"I don't know, chief."

"I have seen him no less than three times, and on separate days."

"What was he doing?"

"Riding as though the Devil had sent for him and he was in a hurry to keep the appointment."

"Describe him, Jack."

"Well, the horse is a dandy, a large, snow-white animal, fleet as a deer, and trained thoroughly, for his rider does not use bridle, saddle, or whip."

"Indeed?"

"The Gold Hunters had such a horse with them, one that belonged to their captain, John Scott, whom they hanged, as I have told you."

"Yes, but this rider is a large man, and looks like a grizzly bear on horseback."

"He wears a grizzly bear skin about his body, a red handkerchief tied around his head, buckskin leggins and moccasins, and carries a knife as long as a bayonet and as broad as a hatchet."

"He carries it drawn, ready for business, too, and goes flying through the mountain deer trails as though he was on a turnpike."

"This is remarkable.
 "But did you not hail him?"
 "You bet I didn't, chief.
 "I didn't wish to bother him a little bit."

"Did you track him?"
 "Only far enough to see that he went toward the canyon of the Gold Hunters."

"Is he not one of them?"
 "He is not."
 "Where does he come from?"
 "Up in the mountains."
 "And goes back there?"
 "I have always seen him going in the same direction, strange to say."

"Did he see you?"
 "Indeed he didn't, chief."
 "Well, Surgeon Powell, what do you think of this mystery of the mountains Jack tells us about?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"He is some poor and unfortunate miner, crazed by his not finding gold, who has been left behind when the others deserted the canyon camp, and roams the mountains like a madman, is my opinion," said Surgeon Powell.

"Doubtless you are right.
 "But, then, where and how does he live?"

"That is a marvel; but we must find out, if only for humanity's sake, when we can do so, Bill."

"You are right, we must.
 "But he must have snug quarters for himself and horse, to stand these blizzards."

"Yes, that he must have."

Pony Pete and Larry were also asked for their opinion of the mysterious horseman, but could not give any solution regarding him.

"When did you see him first, Jack?"
 "Only ten days ago, chief."
 "Well, you know, or do not know, that we have a spook down our way."

"No."
 "Yes, a man who dresses in white, plays ghost, and haunts the graves."

"Who has seen him?"
 "Pony Pete, Larry, several more of the men, and also Surgeon Powell and myself."

"Well, it may be my man in the grizzly garb, only your ghost is not mounted."

"No."
 "But we have not seen our ghost for two weeks and more, so feared he had frozen to death."

"Spooks have too chilly a look to freeze, chief," said Texas Jack, and the story of the strange white form that haunted the three graves was told to him.

Then, as it was growing late, all turned in for much-needed rest.

The morning found the snow storm over, but a fierce wind was blowing.

This did not deter Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell from going up to the cliff to have a look down into the canyon of the Gold Hunters.

Just as they gained the point of lookout, after a hard climb, they saw the Gold Hunters moving in a body up the canyon.

A glance showed that there were seven walking along, and an eighth man was being borne by four others.

"A funeral, surely."
 "Yes."

"Another murder, doubtless, and it cuts their number down to seven," said Buffalo Bill.

Then they watched the men go to the other grave, of the man Texas Jack had seen hanged, and, after digging a resting place for their comrade, consign him to the earth.

This duty done, the seven Gold Hunters hastened back to their cabin and disappeared.

Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell also started upon their return, and reaching the cabin told of what they had seen.

Texas Jack had been very busy packing the supplies, clothing, and all that he was to carry to the Gold Hunters, and said:

"I'll find out if it was another murder to-morrow, for I'll start for their camp in time to get me there just before night."

The next day, after dinner, Texas Jack mounted his horse, and, with four heav-

ily laden pack horses in lead, started for the Gold Hunters' cabin, their comrades seeing him depart with considerable foreboding as to the result.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE SCOUT'S PLEDGE KEPT.

The Gold Hunters were not a happy lot. Half starved, half clothed, with nothing but cheerless winter about them, only a few crumbs of gold being the result in the worthless mines, and having lost their treasure, not to speak of the crimes they had committed against their leader and his defender, they were certainly in trouble.

Their ill humor soon culminated in a quarrel between Gordon Gentry and Buck Braxton.

Each wished to get rid of the other, and at last it culminated in a challenge from Braxton to settle it in a duel.

"I'll toss up with you, best three in five, to see whether the men hang you or me," sneered Gordon Gentry.

To his surprise Buck Braxton took him up at the offer, and the men were pleased with the excitement of the thing.

The toss-up was made, and Buck Braxton lost.

He submitted bravely, and it was his hanging which Texas Jack witnessed from the cliff.

Then Gordon Gentry was thorough master.

He proved this on the night after Buffalo Bill and his companions arrived at Texas Jack's cabin.

He deliberately shot one of the men who tried to get the others to leave the canyon and make an effort to reach the nearest settlement.

"It will be starvation or freezing to death here, so meet it on the trail to try and reach help."

"I'd rather go to Fort Shelter than remain here, and you, Gentry, are the cause of all of our suffering and losses, and I, for one, am in favor of getting rid of you."

These were bold words, but they were the last he ever uttered.

He dropped dead in the cabin, shot through the heart by Gordon Gentry, who asked, quietly:

"Are there any more who wish to get rid of me?"

There were none, at least bold enough to say so.

It was the man thus slain that Buffalo Bill and Doctor Powell had seen from the cliff buried by the side of Buck Braxton.

"I tell you, pards, that John Omohundro who was here will never return," said one of the men that night, as they were waiting for supper.

"I believe he will, for he pledged his word to come back," Gentry remarked.

"What's a man's pledge?"

"Much, to some men."

"Then, too, he has a chance to make a snug sum on his bargain."

"How, cap'n?"

"We promised to double his money for him."

"With what?"

"Well, we expected we'd get more gold here; but we have been disappointed, so we'll give him one bag of real gold, and the other bags we'll sew up and they can contain rocks."

"What's the use of giving him any gold, cap'n, for we'll need it?"

"That's so."

"We'll fool him clear if he comes."

"Yes, and I believe he will."

"Hello in there!"

All started.

It was a surprise to hear a voice without calling to them.

They scarcely dared move.

"Ho, pards, open up, for I'm about frozen."

The men sprung to the door, and the light of the two fires fell full upon a muffled form they knew.

"Omohundro! thank God!" cried Gordon Gentry.

"You said he'd keep his pledge," cried

one man, and the captain was held in high esteem just then.

There were pack horses there, too, and heavily laden.

The miners yelled themselves hoarse. They danced about like so many mad redskins.

The supper, a roast of venison, was hurled out of the door, and Texas Jack having been fairly carried into the house, the supplies were dragged in, and the half famished men shouted:

"A feast, now, a feast!"

"Yes, coffee, coffee!"

"Bacon, too."

"Bread, bread, and here are potatoes."

"Pards, we are made men!"

"No more starving, now."

"Omohundro, you are an angel."

"You've done a great deed, man."

And so went the comments all around, while Texas Jack, warming at the fire, was really touched with sympathy at their wild joy.

They had taken his horses and put them up, and when all were assembled he gave them a generous drink all around.

He saw that they really needed it.

Supper was being cooked, and the ravenous appetite of the men could hardly allow them to wait until it was served.

They ate as only starving men can.

"A few days more and we would have had only game, and the winter is so bad deer are scarce now," said Gentry.

"I kept my pledge, boys."

A cheer greeted the scout's words.

"You have enough supplies now, if you are sparing, to last you until the break-up in spring."

"Indeed, we have, and we'll be sparing, for we know what suffering is! but you are a brave man, to come here through such weather."

"It was my duty, you know."

"Any news at the fort?"

"None to speak of."

"You had a hard trip of it?"

"Yes, of course; but are not some of your men missing, for you seemed to have more?"

A silence greeted the question for an instant, and then Gordon Gentry replied:

"Yes, we were more, but we lost two of our comrades, who died suddenly."

"Too bad," said Texas Jack, and then he began to figure up the costs of the supplies, and without a change of face Gordon Gentry got up and took down some little bags, tightly sewed up, and said:

"Here is more than double in value, but we'll be generous, for you deserve all, and more."

The bags contained not a dollar's worth of gold.

CHAPTER LXIII.

REVEALED.

Texas Jack stowed the bags of alleged gold away without a word.

He felt sure that he was being cheated, for he knew that he had no more than desperadoes to deal with.

Soon after he said:

"Save one pack horse, men, I'm going to ask you to keep the others here for me until I return."

"Certainly, certainly; but when will you come back?" asked Gentry.

"In the spring, for there will be no getting through this winter any more, and I'll be lucky if I get back to the fort."

"Yes, the winter is upon us, and no mistake; but, pard, I've got something to ask you?"

"Yes, captain."

"Did you see any one on your trail here?"

"Any one in this deserted, winter-bound land?"

"Well, I don't wonder you are surprised; but let me tell you that this canyon is haunted."

"Nonsense."

"It's so."

"By what?"

"A spectral horse and rider."

"No."

"Yes, for the spectre, man or devil, o

whatever it is, has ridden into this valley at night half a dozen times."

"Who saw it?"

"I did, and all of us did."

"You surprise me."

"He comes at night, dashes up to the head of the valley and back again."

"Why don't you shoot him?"

"There isn't a man here dare draw bead on him."

"You don't think it is else than a man?"

"We don't know what to think; but he's got us that scared we don't dare go out after night."

"Why, when you hailed us to-night, we were scared for a moment, I can tell you; but, then, he never hails, and so we took heart."

"This is very strange; but what can be his motive?"

"If it is to scare us, he does it."

"I wish you could only stay and see the man."

"I'd like to do so very much, for your story interests me, I can tell you."

"We don't wish to believe in the supernatural, but that white horse and rider gives us the shakes."

"I don't wonder; but I cannot stay to see him."

"But when will you start?"

"By dawn in the morning, for I have no time to lose, and must take advantage of the weather as it now is."

"Good! but bring a few supplies to us when you come in the spring."

"I'll bring all of you something," was the reply, and Texas Jack meant it.

He spread his blankets upon the floor, and was soon apparently fast asleep.

But he heard all that was said.

He awoke early, got his own breakfast, saddled his horse and pack animal, called out:

"Good-by, all," and left the cabin, followed by sleepy responses to his farewell.

Taking the trail for some miles away from his cabin, he then flanked around, and at last was nearing his destination when he heard hoof falls approaching at a run.

At once he drew his horse into a thicket to hide, and as he did so he saw a horseman coming.

It was the weird rider, and he was yet some distance away.

But, as Texas Jack looked he suddenly saw two dark clouds speed out from either side of the trail, coming from a group of rocks, and one settled over the body of the rider, the other over the neck of the horse.

They were lariats, and thrown by skillful hands.

In amazement, the scout then saw the white horse dragged back upon his haunches, and the rider from the animal's back, falling heavily, it appeared.

Two forms then sprang out of covert and were quickly by horse and rider.

Then Texas Jack spurred forward, for he had recognized Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell in the lasso throwers.

They greeted him with a cheery salutation as he drew rein, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Glad you got back all right, Jack; but you see we have made a capture here."

"Yes, sir; but I fear he is hurt."

"No, stunned by the fall, for it was a heavy one."

"Surgeon Powell will soon have him all right in body, and I hope in mind."

"I hope so."

Surgeon Powell was bending over the fallen man, and said:

"He is unconscious, though I believe not hurt really."

"As soon as he recovers we will take him to the cabin."

The horse was standing near, and perfectly quiet, and the three men stood gazing down upon the mysterious rider.

"I have seen him somewhere before," said Buffalo Bill.

In a short while the eyes opened, with a wild, fierce stare.

"Don't be excited, pard, for we are your friends."

"Friends?"

"Yes."

"All white men here are my foes," he said, pitifully.

"No, oh, no."

"Had we been foes we could have shot you; but we wished to take you from the cold to our cabin, so lassoed you and your horse."

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?" he asked, almost savagely.

"I am an officer of the army, a surgeon; this is the great scout, Buffalo Bill, and—"

"Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes."

"Are you Buffalo Bill?"

"I am, sir, and this is my pard, Texas Jack."

"We are from Fort Shelter."

"Buffalo Bill—then I need fear no more."

"And who are you?"

"Who am I?"

"A dead man."

They looked sadly at him when he gave this reply, and Surgeon Powell replied:

"No, no, you are worth a whole graveyard of dead men, as you will soon discover, after I have you in my charge for a few days."

"What is your name?"

"Before I died my name was John Scott."

"I came out here after gold, and brought with me men that I believed to be good and true, to share my fortunate find with me."

"But they were devils at heart, no not all of them, for some of them died true, and one of them was my true friend, and they sought to kill him for it, but you saved him, Buffalo Bill, for he told me so."

"But they hanged me, and—I really can't recall it all, but they put me in my grave, and—"

"Yes, you are Captain John Scott, and the man who defended you was Percy Willard."

"They did hang you, yes, but you were not dead, and they buried you alive; but some one dug you up in time to save your life."

"Some one cared for you, near the grave he took you from, and you have haunted the spot until the last two weeks, when you came here."

"Think! remember, and all will come back to you," said Buffalo Bill, and Texas Jack remarked:

"Yes, you came here to scare the Gold Hunters, your foes who are in the canyon some miles from here, and let me tell you that you have scared them, for they believe you a ghost, when you are really flesh and blood."

"Yes, I believe I am."

"Help me to think, for my mind is clouded," and the poor man passed his hand slowly across his head.

"I will help you to think," and Surgeon Powell placed his hands upon his head and said:

"Look me in the eye and listen to every word I tell you, John Scott."

CHAPTER LXIV.

BACK FROM THE SHADOWS.

With a power of magnetism and hypnotic influence, for which he has ever been noted, Surgeon Frank Powell told the story of the sufferings he had endured, the victim listening to each and every word with dawning reason.

He was thus brought out of the clouded reason the shock had thrown him into, into the lurid light of a clear mind.

As Surgeon Powell said to him that he had been buried alive, and saved from the grave as by a miracle, the man realized the truth of all, and was asked:

"Who took you from that grave?"

"The Indian."

"Do you mean the young Chief Running Eagle?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"He had a retreat in that timber, one he found."

"It is a cave, and was the home of two miners."

"There was a spring there, they had made their cave a good winter home, and had laid in supplies to last them until spring."

"They saw the Indian chief, for he had gone to the desolate place to meet a rival."

"They fired upon the Running Eagle, but missed him."

"He killed them both, scalped them, and buried them."

"He trailed them to their cave and made it his home."

"Then he met his rival and killed him."

"He saw me when I was ahead of the miners; but once I had treated him well, the winter before, given him a pony and an outfit, and he remembered me."

"He would not kill me; but he saw how my people treated me."

"He saw you come, Buffalo Bill, and save Percy Willard."

"Then you guided the miners to shelter, and he dug me from my grave."

"He put in the grave the body of his Indian rival, and he opened the other graves and scalped the two dead men."

"He is an Indian, you know."

"And he took the gold the miners had buried and carried it to his cave."

"There he carried me, brought me back to life, and I remember how he told me all, for it comes back to me now, and he speaks English well."

"He cared for me until I got well, in body, but my mind wandered, I know now that it did, and I became a madman, seeking revenge."

"My good Indian friend guided me to these mountains, to haunt my foes."

"I had haunted that timber, and when the Gold Hunters passed through, coming here, the Running Eagle and I stole three of their horses."

"This one here is my own horse, you know."

"And where is your home now?"

"I will take you there."

"It is a deserted miner's cabin, up a canyon, and is very comfortable."

"We brought supplies there from those in the miners' cave."

"And what was your intention?"

"To haunt my foes, I take it, as now I view my actions in the light of reason."

"To kill them one by one, and thus be avenged."

"Had you not met me, I would now be mad; but I am sane now, am I not, surgeon?"

"You are, as sane as I am."

"It was a temporary loss of reason from shock."

"Where is the Indian?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Gone back to his people, proud that he carries back the scalp of his rival, and the scalps of four white men."

"He will be the chief of his tribe now, and will come back here soon to see me."

"We are glad of that."

"We will show you where our cabin is, and then go with you to yours, that we may know where it is."

"When your Indian friend comes back he will know what we wish to tell you, about his father, the Red Willow, and our treatment of him."

"We have a great deal to tell you," said Surgeon Powell.

"And let me tell you that I expected to wait until spring to catch those Gold Hunters and punish them."

"But they are seven now, and with you we are six, so we will soon capture them, and taking chances between the storms, return to the fort."

"As for the Running Eagle, he can have the supplies the Gold Hunters now have to take back to his people."

After some more conversation, the party started for the scouts' cabin, and Larry and Pony Pete nearly had a fit when they saw the mysterious horseman ride up with their chief.

John Scott was not hard to persuade

to remain the day and night at the scouts' cabin, and the whole story was gone over again.

The next day the scouts accompanied him to his cabin, and to the joy of all they not only found there Running Eagle, the young chief, but also Percy Willard.

The latter's story was soon told, how he had followed Buffalo Bill, got lost, and been captured by Black Buffalo and his band.

He was with the band when they had fought Buffalo Bill and his scouts, and had been carried captive to the Indian village.

There he was held under severe treatment until Chief Red Willow's return, and he took him to his tepee as soon as he heard what Black Buffalo had done.

Soon after, to the joy of all, the Running Eagle had returned, and from him he heard how he had saved John Scott from his grave and where he then was, but with a clouded mind, for the young chief had discovered this.

When he asked to go to his friend, Running Eagle said he would guide him there.

is he had done.

"We now outnumber the Gold Hunters, so will capture them to-night, before another storm delays us," said Buffalo Bill.

And so it was decided, all making arrangements for the attack on the Gold Hunters, and Running Eagle being delighted to accompany the palefaces on the warpath.

Texas Jack was to be the guide to the canyon, the horses were to be first secured, and then the Texan Scout was to ride up to the door, make himself known, and say that he had been forced to return.

When all was ready the trail was taken for the Gold Hunters' camp, in spite of the biting cold of the night.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

The ride to the canyon was made in safety, and arriving toward midnight, the horses were secured in their stable, and then the scouts went to the cabin of the men, who little dreamed of danger so near.

A call at the door brought a reply, and the door was quickly opened to admit Texas Jack, after the startled miners knew who he was.

The fires in each end of the cabin were burning brightly, and following Texas Jack the frightened Gold Hunters beheld the tall form of Buffalo Bill, the uniformed figure of Surgeon Powell, then John Scott, in his grizzly bear skin garb, the Chief Running Eagle, then Pony Pete and Larry.

All had a revolver in each hand, and Buffalo Bill cried in thunder tones:

"Hands up, all of you!"

"Never! I'll die first!" cried Gordon Gentry, and he rushed upon Texas Jack, crying:

"Traitor!"

"Your soul goes with mine!"

It was so quickly done no one realized just how; but Running Eagle was before him, there was a thud, the Indian's knife had been plunged into his breast, and in a second more, ere any one could prevent, the scalp of Gordon Gentry was in the hands of the young chief.

"A fitting death," said Buffalo Bill, and the palefaces were all of the same opinion.

No one else resisted.

The sight of John Scott alive seemed to paralyze them.

They were readily secured, and the scouts camped there for the night.

Early in the morning the body of Gordon Gentry was buried, and the supplies in the cabin were packed upon four horses and turned over to Running Eagle, to whom Buffalo Bill gave the weapons of the man he had slain.

Then the march was taken up for the cabin of the scouts, but as another blizzard was threatening, and accommoda-

tions there were limited, it was decided to remain in the Gold Hunters' quarters and send to John Scott's cabin and the scouts' for all that was there.

This was done, the parties returning just as another fierce storm swept over the land.

Detained for days, as soon as they could the scouts started with their prisoners, Running Eagle going with them, for he would be really much nearer his village when he reached Fort Cody than from where he was.

It was a rapid, hard ride, but was made in safety, a halt at the miners' cave being made to let the Indian get the supplies there, and John Scott to take his gold, which Running Eagle had taken from the grave for him.

Just as night fell the scouts reached their winter quarters, and the surprise of Sombrero Sam and his comrades was intense at what their chief and his small party had accomplished.

A delay of a week was made there, on account of bad weather; then the camp was broken up and all started for Fort Cody.

It was another surprise to all there when Buffalo Bill arrived with his party, and Lieutenant Niles remarked:

"Well, Cody, you have done wonders upon your winter campaign, and, as soon as we can, we'll start for Fort Shelter, there being no further need of remaining here."

This was done, and when the Running Eagle went his way alone, he was well supplied with stores, was given the ponies taken from Black Buffalo, and was saluted with rousing cheers from soldiers and scouts alike.

Two days after, with one night camp on the way, the cavalcade pulled into Fort Shelter, amid the wildest cheering of the garrison. Loud was the praise bestowed upon Buffalo Bill, Doctor Frank Powell, and the others for their success in the face of such great obstacles.

As they could not well get away, John Scott and Percy Willard decided to remain for the remainder of the winter at the fort, and when, at last, they did leave, in the spring, the six miners accompanied them, for it had been their victims' wish to have them do so.

Both John Scott and Percy Willard had pleaded with the colonel that the six men were not the real culprits, but had been led astray by Gordon Gentry and Buck Braxton.

They were to go back to their homes, therefore to go with them. It was to be a dead secret with all, that there had been trouble, and the story to be told was that their comrades had lost their lives in fights they had had.

Most of those slain were young men without families; but, to the others would be given their share of the gold that had caused so much sorrow and wrongdoing.

Noble John Scott would have it so, and equally noble Percy Willard agreed with him.

How deeply those six men felt the goodness of the two they had so terribly wronged can only be imagined.

Back, then, to their homes they went, and a royal welcome awaited them there; but, the secret of their wilderness tragedy remains buried in the hearts of all.

And out on the far frontier, Buffalo Bill, the man whom the Gold Hunters had brought to bay, still continues by his superb strength and nerve and wisdom to win the fame and honor that have made his name known the wide world over, and that fame will live in the history of the Great Wilderness in the Heart of the Continent as one of its most thrilling chapters.

THE END.

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